On sealing a lakebed: mass media and environmental democratisation in China

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1. Introduction

The evolution of the Chinese Central Government’s policies and actions in the past 15 years has resulted in a transition towards an environmental governance regime that is more open to public consultation and more transparent than the traditional way of managing the environment before the 1990s. We refer to such a transition in environmental governance as a process of environmental democratisation. Many researchers have observed the development of civil society during China’s recent reforms (e.g. Yang, 2003a). Despite the emergence of this field and the significance of environmental democratisation in China, little research has been conducted to examine the process of democratising the Chinese environmental governance regime.

In many countries, the Internet, by improving public access to environmental information and stimulating online environmental communication, has become an instrument for increased public participation in environmental decision-making (Scharl, 2004). The Internet is gradually becoming a part of millions of Chinese people’s lives too, providing them a platform for online environmental communication. Several forms of online communication, such as Bulletin Board System (BBS) Forum and BLOG, have been adopted for the discussion of environmental concerns. This paper examines the role of the mass media in China’s environmental democratisation, with a particular focus on the role of the Internet.

The paper seeks answers to two central questions. In what respects have the Chinese Central Government’s policies and actions towards environmental governance evolved in the past 15 years? What has been the role of the mass media in these transformations? The vehicle for this analysis is the so-called lakebed-sealing project in the Old Summer Palace, Beijing (see Fig. 1 for a map of the Palace and its location). Recent changes to the hydrology of the surface and groundwater systems that have historically kept the lakes at the Old Summer Palace supplied with water caused the administrators of the site to set out to artificially seal the beds of the lakes in an attempt to maintain full lake levels. The work was...
begun without an environmental effects study as required by China’s Environmental Impact Assessment Law. The merits of the lakebed sealing are arguable; however, the issue here is the political events surrounding the illegal actions. The lakebed-sealing case provides, we argue, a significant vehicle through which to examine the transformation of environmental governance in China and the role of mass media, particularly the Internet, in that transformation. Since this significance can only be evaluated in the context of the evolving environmental governance regime, the next section describes the changing forms of environmental governance in China. This is followed, in Section 3, by a brief review of the potential roles of the mass media in environmental democratisation—especially in China, which is not a liberal democracy. In Section 4, the paper provides a brief introduction to the controversy over the lakebed-sealing case. The paper then describes the evolution of the mass media in Chinese society, both traditional and online forms, illustrating how these media have been used by the central government as tools to assist in governance. Section 6 provides evidence from web sites, interviews with members of blogging circles, bulletin board postings and other online surveys to indicate the degree to which an online, unorganised environmental movement is emerging in China, and the hopes and expectations of its members for environmental democratisation. The conclusion brings this material together to argue that the transformation of the governance regime has its origins in both government policy and the grassroots.

2. **Context: evolving environmental governance in China**

The historic Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress held by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on December 18, 1978 symbolised the start of a series of reforms and developments in China’s economic, political, legal and social spheres (Goodman, 1994). Rapid economic transition has not brought about a radical turn towards a western-style democracy based on open and public participation in the political process. Instead, the Chinese leadership has confined its political reform to political decentralisation, development of technocracy, improvement of governance, smoothing out the leadership transitions, and efforts to separate the government from the Party (Wang and Wong, 1999). China’s environmental governance has also undergone a transformation since the late 1970s.

The transformation of the environmental governance regime can be divided into Pre-reform (before 1978) and Post-reform Eras (Goodman, 1994; Weatherley, 2006), with the latter subdivided into the Transitional and Modernisation Phases. During the Pre-reform Era, the Central Government simply did not pay much attention to environmental issues. Since 1978, the leadership has initiated a range of reforms in all aspects of contemporary Chinese society; meanwhile, the National People’s Congress (NPC), as the highest law-making organ in China, attempted to establish a legal framework for environmental protection (Sinkule and Ortolano, 1995). After
this Transitional Phase, the focus shifted in 1992 to institutionalising an effective and efficient regulatory system for environmental governance through political modernisation. Environmental Non-Government Organisations were registered; SEPA began monthly environmental quality reports; the EIA Law came into effect (1 September 2003); in 2005, SEPA started China’s first environmental protection storm, the centre of which was The Old Summer Palace eastern lakebed-sealing case (SEPA, 2005a); and during this storm, 82 large projects (involving 112.3 billion RMB investment) were suspended for inappropriate EIA processes (Gu, 2007).

Although some environmental regulations were promulgated in the 1950s and 1960s (Ross and Silk, 1987), a legal foundation for environmental protection was only established during the Transitional Phase, 1978–1992 (Qu, 1991; Lo et al., 2000). However, EIAs were conducted for only about 60% of construction projects (CEYEC, 1993). During the Modernisation Phase, the implementation of EIA has improved dramatically, particularly since the issuing of China’s EIA Law in 2002: by 1999, the annual EIA rate reached 95% and is now approaching 100% (CEYEC, 1992–2006); 1 year after the lakebed-sealing case, the Central Government issued the Environmental Protection Administrative Permission Hearing Regulation (Trial) to promote public participation in environmental governance, including EIA processes.

In the past three decades, China’s environmental regulatory institutions have evolved in response to the transition of environmental protection from a fringe issue to a pivotal focus in the contemporary political arena. The status of the state’s environmental protection apparatus has been raised from Environmental Protection Leading Group of the State Council with no administrative authority in the 1970s to Environmental Protection Administration under the Ministry of Urban and Rural Construction and Environmental Protection in the 1980s, and then, since 1998, SEPA has been a ministry directly under the State Council (Xinhua Net, 2003). Likewise, the number of environmental protection bureaus (EPBs) and environmental protection offices (EPOs) grew rapidly (Qu, 1991; NEPA, 1992). These institutions of China’s environmental protection bureaucracy follow a structural pattern common to China’s agencies of government: they receive policy mandates and instructions from SEPA through provincial level EPBs, while each EBP or EPO is a department of a local government (Sinkule and Ortolano, 1995; see also Lieberthal, 1992; Dreyer, 2006). The dual track of environmental governance authority has resulted in problems in the implementation of environmental laws and regulations (Sinkule and Ortolano, 1995; Schroeder, 1992), particularly since EPBs are constantly juggling the demands of two superiors—the local governments and the parent EPBs (Sinkule and Ortolano, 1995). This problematic situation has improved since the lakebed-sealing case. Five regional supervision centres have been set up by SEPA to improve administration of environmental issues at provincial and municipal levels by supervising local EPBs, co-ordinating trans-boundary issues, investigating serious accidents and dealing with emergencies (People’s Daily Online, 2006; Li, 2006). This modification of China’s environmental governance system has increased SEPA’s capacity to enforce environmental laws and regulations.

3. Mass media and environmental democratisation

A key characteristic of developed societies is the dramatic emergence of environmental consciousness and movements from the early 1970s onwards, especially Europe and North America (Hannigan, 1995, 2006). Yet the new consciousness and even some government actions have not had satisfactory environmental outcomes (Andersen and Massa, 2000). The concept of ‘ecological modernisation’ (Huber, 2004; Janicke, 1990, 2006) is one response to this failure, which argues that industrial society can be transformed to be ecologically friendly, under the right circumstances (Gibbs, 2000, 2002). Critical ‘right circumstances’ are appropriate technical innovation (Huber, 2004) and democratic institutional structures (Janicke, 1990, 2006).

Most of the literature that applies ecological modernisation theory concentrates on environment–society relationships in post-industrial societies in developed countries. Yet rapid industrialisation has seen mass environmental movements emerge in many developing countries, especially in East Asia (Mol and van Buuren, 2003; Mol, 2006). Mol and Carter (2006) studied China’s transitional environmental governance using ecological modernisation theory. They point out that ecological modernisation is taking place in tandem with political modernisation, which they characterise as the replacement of a rigid, hierarchical, command-and-control system of environmental governance by more decentralised and flexible systems. Others (e.g. Butler and Macey, 1996) have demonstrated the drawbacks of environmental regulation through intensive federal command-and-control regulation of environmental risks, which mitigate against the adaptation of environmental policies to local socio-economic and ecological circumstances. On the other hand, local governments may relegate environmental protection behind economic development (Mol and Carter, 2006).

However, in developed countries, environmental movements emerged in already relatively open societies. In societies like China, a precondition for an environmental movement is the availability of information about environmental conditions, regulations and behaviours, and a space in which to discuss these (the democratic precondition of Janicke, 1990, 2006). In China, though, the mass media have been manipulated by the Chinese Central Government as instruments of social control, a state machine to promote its policies and achievements. The Chinese mass media before the economic reforms in 1978 were tools of mass propaganda and persuasion (Chang et al., 1993), tightly controlled by the CCP as its mouthpiece (Zhao, 1998). (This role has become apparent again in internal Chinese reporting on the disturbances in Tibet in early 2008.) Being state-owned, almost all the media groups in China remain affiliated with the government (Wen, 1998). But journalism, like other sectors in China, has been reforming since the mid-1980s, with the emergence of a discourse of democratisation (Zhao, 1998). Despite the failure of the pro-democracy movement in June 1989, and various crackdowns on debate since, the reform of the mass media has been encouraged, ironically, by media commercialisation since the adoption of a socialist market economy since 1992.
In a government-dominated country like China, the freedom of the mass media is tied closely to the degree of democracy. Although we provide evidence of signs of increasing public participation and transparency in environmental decision-making, these are not evidence of democracy: Chinese society remains in the control of the state, and there are no national-level contests for political power. Increasing participation and transparency are thus signs of democratisation, not signs of democracy, much less signs of an irreversible move towards democracy (Goodman, 2008). Debate about China’s political development and modernisation since the 1980s is between two competing schools of thought—democratic and neo-authoritarian (Petracca and Xiong, 1990; Arthur, 1992; Sautman, 1992). While the democrats argue that democracy is an essential prerequisite for modernising China, the neo-authoritarians insist that modernisation in China can only be achieved with authoritarian rule (Petracca and Xiong, 1990; Arthur, 1992; Sautman, 1992). In developed countries, environmental consciousness has been a grassroots movement, which implies that environmental democratisation is a prerequisite for ecological modernisation, as Janicke (1990, 2006) argued. Furthermore, the evolution of the economic system has implications for governance (Wu, 1989), and like Wu, we shall argue that the corporatisation and commercialisation of state enterprises, including media enterprises, have implications for the openness and coverage of environmental issues.

Environmental protection is not as sensitive as some political issues and its success depends to a large extent on popular support and participation; thus, the Chinese mass media have been given a gradually increasing degree of freedom in terms of reporting environmental issues, including environmental conflicts and abuses, for the last 15 years. Wang (2005c) studied print media coverage of an environmental dispute between two cities in Guangdong Province in 2000 and suggested that China’s environmental governance was certainly becoming more transparent, though with continuing control over information by the governments at all levels. In perhaps the first domestic book about environmental communication, Green Media, Wang (2005a) examines environmental communication and explores the roles of all forms of mass media in China’s environmental protection industry, without, however, addressing the importance of mass media in China’s ongoing environmental democratic movement or linking different factors in the growth of environmental media to their shared root—environmental democratisation.

The Internet, as a new form of mass media, has also played an important role in sharing information and communication. As networks of people (Gurak and Logie, 2003), the Internet has a close relationship to democratic movements (Kidd, 2003). Although the Chinese government still monitors the use of and access to the Internet, and filters out many web sites, cyberspace is a much freer social space in the Chinese public sphere than any other medium. There were 162 million Internet users nationwide by the first half of 2007 (CNNIC, 2007). China’s fast-growing population in cyberspace has resulted in burgeonning attention from both Chinese academics and international commentators, particularly the connections between the virtual social sphere of cyberspace and political control and democracy (Abbott, 2001; Harwit and Clark, 2001; Yang, 2003a). Yang (2003b,c, 2004) extends this research to the interplays between the Internet, China’s environmentalism and the development of democracy; he argues that the use of the Internet by the general public has fostered debates about, and the articulation of, various domestic social problems, which leads to environmental democratisation in cyberspace.

We shall build on Yang’s work. In particular, we seek to contribute to this literature by examining the role of the mass media in China’s evolving environmental governance, especially focussing on the new medium—the Internet. We seek to understand how cyberspace has become a freer (than the traditional media) social space for the environmental movement, identifying both grassroots and government motives in this trend. We seek, too, to understand how users perceive this new medium and what they hope to achieve through it. In doing this, we seek to understand the degree to which an environmental democracy has been emerging in China—a country far removed from the usual societies analysed through the lens of the theory of ecological modernisation.

Of course, to argue that cyberspace has become an increasingly free space for the environmental movement is neither to claim that it is free for the environmental movement nor to claim that it is increasingly free for other arenas of social debate. Reportage of human rights in China during the lead up to the Olympic Games in August 2008 has made clear the lack of media freedom in China, including the use of the Internet. The government controls access to websites, chat forums and blogging services, using filters that block keywords that are considered subversive (Reporters sans frontières, 2008; see also Olympic Watch, 2008). All we argue is that there has been increasing public involvement in environmental governance, fostered by the growing use of the Internet. The fact of government censorship of other debates, and punishment of those who participate in them, means furthermore that even the democratisation of environmental governance is on government suffrance and that this suffrance may be removed in the future.

### 4. The lakebed-sealing case

In 2005, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) started China’s first environmental protection ‘storm’, the Chinese expression for a nationwide environmental protection campaign, to implement the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Law (Law of the People’s Republic of China on Evaluation of Environmental Effects). For several months in 2005, the lakebed-sealing project became the focus of this first environmental protection storm. The case attracted mass attention from both offline and online communities. Compared to other illegal projects, the investment involved in this lake-sealing project is tiny. However, this case was iconic—a milestone in the history of Chinese environmental governance, and focussed on a culturally important site.

The lakebed-sealing case was such a crucial event in China’s environmental democratisation for several reasons. Firstly, the case emerged in March 2005 with a letter posted on the Internet by an environmental activist, Zhengchun Zhang,
and a phone call from him to the People’s Daily (Wang, 2006). Zhengchun Zhang is a visiting professor at Lanzhou University. In other words, this controversy was raised by the general public rather than officials. Secondly, the construction site lies in the ruins of the Old Summer Palace—a cultural and historical heritage site that carries the memory of the nation’s humiliation during the nineteenth century. An important palace of the Qing emperors, the Old Summer Palace was looted and burned in 1860, during the Second Opium War, and then again in 1900 (Wang, 1999). Thirdly, SEPA held a public hearing in April 2005 to discuss the environmental impact of the Old Summer Palace lakebed-sealing project—the first national public hearing on an environmental issue. The public hearing was transparent throughout the entire process, including the environmental impact assessment. Ting Zheng Hui, the Chinese translation of ‘hearing’, can also mean ‘inquiry’, but this process functioned only as a public forum rather than an inquiry, as it did not result in a resolution of the controversy. Fourthly, the lakebed-sealing case revealed a common practice: many construction projects start without proper environmental impact assessment. Last but not least, the lakebed-sealing case has accelerated the process of environmental democratisation in China.

The first newspaper report about the illegal lakebed-sealing construction project in the Old Summer Palace was written in the People’s Daily and its website by Yongxin Zhao, who was awarded ‘Figure of Green China’ in 2005 (Wang, 2005b). His report initiated a series of reports on the case by news agencies around the nation and online BBS discussion. Most news and portal websites established special sections for the lakebed-sealing case. The media played a crucial role. The holding of a national-level environmental public hearing on the environmental impact of the lakebed sealing was held by SEPA in response to the media coverage and online discussion of this incident. More than 120 people, ranging from an 11-year-old primary school student to experts in their 80s, attended this hearing on 13 April 2005 (Qin, 2005). Thirty speakers expressed their opinions on the lakebed-sealing case during this four-hour hearing. The hearing displayed conflicting opinions on the controversy over sealing the Eastern Lakes in the Old Summer Palace (Xinhua Net, 2005), which are explored in the EIA report published by Tsinghua University EIA Office (2005). Although it did not resolve the conflict, this national-level public hearing is important as an historic landmark in China’s environmental democratisation, opening up a new era of environmental governance and redefining the public’s role in environmental decision-making. The media played a crucial role.

The holding of a national-level environmental public hearing indicates that the Central Government is fostering public debates about environmental issues. Increasing transparency of governance, particularly in the field of environmental protection, has made the public more informed. Meanwhile, the role of the public in decision-making about environmental management has been enhanced with the introduction of several policies, such as the Environmental Protection Administrative Permission Hearing Regulation (Trial), that encourage public engagement in environmental governance. These are all signs of a democratising environmental governance regime in China.

The public hearing set up a platform for the public and experts to exchange views and inform a wide audience of the latest developments in the lakebed-sealing controversy. The Environmental Impact Assessment for the Old Summer Palace Eastern Lakebed-Sealing Project was completed by Tsinghua University EIA Office in June 2005. The approval of this EIA report by SEPA officially drew the controversy to a conclusion. In consideration of the fragile ecosystem, Tsinghua University EIA Office (2005) advised that the lakebed sealing should be discontinued and that the already installed watertight membrane under the lakebed should be modified but not removed. However, the damage to the original artificial wetland ecosystem was acknowledged, while the EIA report also pointed out that the illegal construction resulted in huge difficulties in assessing its ecological costs (Tsinghua University EIA Office, 2005). According to the report, the local lake ecosystem can possibly benefit from the lakebed-sealing project, while the regional hydrological system was disturbed, which may lead to further ecological degradation in Beijing Municipality (Tsinghua University EIA Office, 2005).

5. New media power in China’s environmental democratisation

Since the ‘Open Door’ Policy, the state control of mass media has gradually been loosened, particularly since the commercialisation of the media industry and the introduction of the Internet in the early 1990s (Cheung, 2006). Mass media can command the attention of many people through sophisticated techniques of engaging interest (de Burgh, 2003), playing an important role in China’s environmental democratisation. This section examines the role of emerging media power in the recent environmental democratisation. Section 5.1 explores the changing media landscape in China, while Section 5.2 examines the role of the mass media in China’s environmental democratic movement through an analysis of online materials about the lakebed-sealing case.

5.1. Changing media landscape in China

As a contingent consequence of the dramatic economic reform during the previous decade, China’s media landscape has been transformed since the early 1990s, particularly through the structural reform of the state-owned media industry and the development of the Internet.

The media industry in China began its transformation after more than a decade of market reform of the economy. As a part of the nationwide commercialisation of state-owned organs, state media groups have been corporatised since the late 1980s. Much of the Chinese mass media industry has become structurally and functionally semi-independent
(Huang, 2000). These media groups became legally separate entities as a result of the changes in ownership. Despite their financial independence, most mass media groups continue to be affiliated with the government in terms of content (Wen, 1998): commercialisation without true independence (Chan, 1993).

Despite the contradiction between economic liberalism and political illiberalism, sufficient freedom exists to report issues that are not politically sensitive, including environmental protection. The commercialisation of mass media requires the press to follow the rule of the market economy: meet the needs of the audience. With mounting environmental concern in China, many people have more and more interest in environmental issues (Ma, 2007), for the state of the environment is closely related to quality of life; therefore, there has been a sharp increase in the number and quality of news reports on environmental issues in China’s mass media from the early 1990s (CCEP Online, 2007).

With the rapid development of mass media infrastructure across the country, the government has also increased its use of mass media to improve the environmental governance regime. In 1993, the China Century Environmental Protection Campaign was initiated by 14 ministries and departments of the Central Government to increase transparency and obtain environmental information from all aspects of society. This is acknowledged as the most successful media campaign on environmental issues in China’s media history (Wang, 2005a), having run with a different theme annually for the past 15 years (CCEP Online, 2007). The maturation of the China Century Environmental Protection Campaign reflects the gradual development of democratic discourse in China’s mass media industry. Between 1993 and 2006, more than 200,000 reports on environmental abuse and conflicts were publicised in China’s mass media (CCEP Online, 2007). According to a 6-year study by Friends of Nature (2000) on 75 newspapers, environmental awareness in China’s newspapers had improved significantly by the end of the 20th century. Meanwhile, other media products on environment, such as documentaries and films, have also become more common (Wang, 2005a).

The mass media has been adopted in a new approach by SEPA to empower China’s environmental governance: SEPA encourages journalists to uncover illegal environmental abuses (Wang, 2007). In other words, SEPA uses the media’s ability to expose environmental infringements to construct social pressure on environmental wrongdoers. Mr. Yue Pan, as SEPA’s Vice Administrator and spokesman, used to hold key positions in several central newspaper administrative offices (SEPA, 2005b), which explains his understanding of media and public scrutiny in China’s environmental governance. Since the iconic lakebed-sealing case, Mr. Yue Pan has emphasised the pivotal role of mass media in transforming environmental governance on many occasions (China Youth Daily, 2007). The mass media can place pressure on those enterprises that violate environmental laws as well as those local EPBs that assist illegal activities by covering them up. The involvement of the mass media in reporting local environmental abuses and wrongdoings can effectively empower SEPA.

The Internet has also played an important role in sharing information and communication, offering a new and different approach to environmental communication. The innovative means of information sharing and exchanging in cyberspace have resulted in burgeoning attention from SEPA; therefore, the Internet has also been adopted as a tool to increase the transparency of environmental governance by keeping the public informed about environmental issues. According to SEPA’s current policy on environmental governance transparency, environmental information is updated regularly on SEPA’s website, because SEPA believes that public confidence in its environmental governance can be improved as the degree of transparency rises (People’s Daily Online, 2007). According to existing environmental laws in China, the disclosure of environmental information is a citizen’s right. By taking advantage of this new vehicle, SEPA is implementing the related guidelines on ‘open information’ by releasing information and reports on the environment regularly on its website. A new regulation on environmental governance transparency, which took effect in May 2008, can potentially enhance the current practice of information transparency in environmental governance.

However, the Internet offers not only audience-oriented broadcasting (also achieved by conventional mass media) but also an interactive communicating platform in cyberspace. In other words, the traditional mass media merely provide a single directional information flow from the newspapers, TV and radio stations to the audience, while the Internet allows a dual- or multi-directional information exchange and communication. Thus Fig. 2 identifies trends in the use of ‘letters’ and ‘visits’ to environmental government institutions. ‘Letters’ refer to written complaints to governments, while ‘visits’ refer to face-to-face complaints to government officials in SEPA and local EPBs. A substantial rise in the number of ‘letters’ and only a slight increase in the number of ‘visits’ can be observed. With the rapid development of Internet infrastructure in China, millions of Internet users can submit written complaints in the form of emails. In other words, the Internet allows cheap and easy complaints from the public on environmental issues, which is a reason for the significant increment in the number of ‘letters’, when the number of ‘visits’ merely increased slightly over the same period. The rapid rise in complaints on environmental issues is vital to China’s democratising environmental governance, which reflects the emerging interactions between China’s environmental protection bureaus and the public.

Thus the changing dynamics of China’s mass media. On the one hand, the conventional mass media are playing an increasingly vital role in safeguarding the environment by reporting environmental crises, responding to a growing public interest and their own commercial orientation. On the other hand, the Internet establishes a network for people to exchange information and a virtual platform for the general public to be involved in SEPA’s environmental decision-making, which complements mass media by allowing more discussion and controversy as opposed to the party line of the mass media. In both, the government’s attitude that the environment is important but not politically contentious provides a relatively unregulated space in which these activities can occur. SEPA’s embrace of the mass media as a tool of environmental governance serves to encourage these trends.
5.2. Analyses of online materials

The year 2003 has been widely acknowledged as the ‘Year of Network Opinion’ in China, the date since when public opinion on the Internet from online bulletin boards, forums, chat rooms, postings and web blogs on numerous Chinese websites prompted the government to take action on various occasions (Tai, 2006). The lakebed-sealing case gave the Central Government its first taste of how millions of Chinese Internet users could respond to such an environmental incident. Here we use the results of a Google search, BBS messages about the lakebed-sealing case and an online survey to provide information about this response.

The lakebed-sealing case quickly became the centre of focus online nationwide, and a Google search with the keywords—The Old Summer Palace EIA—a year after the outbreak of the incident (in March 2006) turned up over 269,000 articles about the lakebed-sealing case. A random selection of 100 articles from this Google search reveals that approximately 60% (i.e. 161,400 items) of the web pages comprised articles from major news sources. Another 15% (i.e. 40,350 items) of the pages consisted of articles from personal blogs and other similar comments. The remaining 25% (i.e. 67,250 items) we judge to be irrelevant, ranging from general articles on the Old Summer Palace to advertisements. In other words, the lakebed-sealing case attracted enormous attention from Internet users. More than 200,000 articles on various websites are related to the lakebed-sealing case. This is despite the fact that some of articles had already been deleted by the host websites before our search. This Google search provides a big picture within which to understand the information contained in BBS messages that we have analysed.

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BBS is one of the most commonly used means of online communication by Chinese Internet users. By using BBS, people can simply make comments after reading articles. We have analysed a collection of BBS messages. Tens of thousands of BBS messages were written by Chinese Internet users, who commented on the related news articles throughout the cyber sphere. Most BBS messages were deleted by the websites approximately 1 year after the lakebed-sealing case. Among the major websites in China, SINA.com, which ranks as the second most popular website and has had a BBS forum for more than 10 years, has kept a relatively complete collection of the BBS messages on this issue (CNNIC, 2006), located at: http://comment4.news.sina.com.cn/comment/skin/default.html?channel=gn&newsid=1-1-7129438&style=1&nice=0&rid=0&page=0&face=&hot=_112_3_10.

All 6519 BBS messages found at SINA.com have been read and summarised according to their degree of support for various propositions. Almost half of the messages expressed outrage at the illegal lakebed-sealing project, while nearly one-sixth of the comments support the idea of conserving water through a watertight membrane. The remaining 35% are considered neutral in terms of their position.

Among the BBS messages we selected all postings that were supported by at least one hundred readers and translated the five most supported postings among them, as shown in Table 1. The most supported message overall displayed people’s concern about the potential negative ecological impacts on the regional environment of sealing the lakebed. The second, third and fourth most supported BBS messages reflected public anger at proceeding with the lakebed-sealing project without having an appropriate EIA. One message that supported the lakebed-sealing project also found its place in the list of the five most supported BBS postings. Evidently, there are conflicting views of the merits of the lakebed sealing; however, there was widespread anger at the lack of an EIA.

Since the neutral propositions comprise a blend of viewpoints, the five most representative neutral messages were identified and translated, as shown in Table 2. The first message mirrored the demand for democracy in environmental protection. The second and fourth messages stressed the significance of the rule of the law, particularly the enforcement of the EIA Law, in China’s environmental protection. The second and fourth messages stressed the significance of the rule of the law, particularly the enforcement of the EIA Law, in China’s environmental protection.
Table 1 – The five most supported BBS messages at SINA.com.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It (the water-tight membrane) is harmful to the environment, so it should certainly be removed immediately!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The sealing construction was started with no EIA; and the water-tight membrane is to be removed now. Who is responsible for all these? I am sorry for the tax I paid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The management of the Old Summer Palace Ruins Park must take the legal responsibility!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Administrative Office of the Old Summer Palace Ruins Park violated the law, which almost produced an irreparable mistake. Why the responsible leaders and members of staff were not questioned? The people who take most responsibility should resign automatically!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I support the lakebed-sealing construction in the Old Summer Palace. I have been involved in the landscape construction industry for a long time. I think that this project is the best solution both economically and technically.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2 – The five most representative neutral BBS messages at SINA.com.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Democratic decision-making represents the new idea of modern politics. Environmental protection is the 'public environmental protection', rather than an issue that affects only the minority. As a public affair, it demands collective actions throughout the society. The fair platform established among the government, the public and the media allows the public to have opportunities in obtaining and communicating all kinds of ideas. The government is also under the scrutiny of the public and media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The rule of law is the best weapon in resolving all kinds of conflicts. With the introduction of the EIA, it was widely regarded as a 'soft law', which led to many construction projects started without EIAs. This does not only lead to the degradation of China’s ecosystem, but also ruin the dignity of the law. The principle of the rule of law was being displayed through the processing of the Old Summer Palace case, which can be used as the example for processing future similar environmental illegal cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>If the officials can benefit, then that is the best plan. In terms of ecological concerns and public opinions, they do not matter! EIA is EIA. The court and procuratorate should investigate economic issues and legal issues. Tsinghua University is not an administrative bureau; hence, it can only be responsible for technical issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>It is a victory in environmental protection! This is a vivid example of promoting environmental protection knowledge! This is the most effective warning: the consequence will not be good for all departments, if they neglect the issue of environmental protection!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Government’s increasing tolerance of online discussion about environmental issues and SEPA’s support of media and public scrutiny are evidence that they view the media and the public as allies in safeguarding the environment in the course of environmental democratisation.

Of course, the BBS messages conflicted with each other. During the public hearing, experts from various disciplines also stated different opinions for and against the project. Unlike an online petition, not all the message writers hold the same point of view, but display a diversity of opinions; therefore, the focus of the controversy over sealing the Eastern Lakes in the Old Summer Palace is not just about these wrongdoings in environmental management of the Old Summer Palace but more importantly about the demand for transparency and a more democratic approach in China’s environmental governance in the future.

6. An emerging environmental movement in China

The question—*is there an emerging environmental movement in China?*—was asked by Stalley and Yang (2006) when they investigated environmentalism among university students in Beijing between the 1990s and early 2000s. They found little likelihood of the mounting environmental consciousness in universities evolving into an independent environmental movement. However, China’s environmental democratic movement has emerged rapidly from the grassroots during the past few years. The lakebed-sealing case, a milestone in the history of environmental governance in China, has changed the trajectory of China’s environmental democratisation, effectively accelerating it. Since the outbreak of the lakebed-sealing case in 2005, all kinds of environmental protection theme communities have emerged in both the real social sphere and cyberspace. This section investigates the emerging environmental cyber-movement in China, providing evidence from online interviews with bloggers. Here we investigate web-based online groups, which are unregistered environmental NGOs that operate mainly through the World Wide Web (compare Yang’s 2005 classification of emerging environmental NGOs).

According to the 20th Statistical Survey Report on Internet Development in China, more than 30 million Internet users nationwide are considered to be bloggers (CNNIC, 2007). If a BBS represents a conventional online communication technology, blogging is a much more sophisticated network invention. SINA.com has one of the largest and best-established blogging systems of all the major Chinese websites; it features a blogging circles system. By August 2007, the total number of circles at SINA.com reached 606 358, containing 96 circles with the keywords ‘environmental protection’ and at least a hundred keywords ‘environmental science & policy 12 (2009) 71–83’

online interviews of its members. Among the current environmental blogging circles at SINA.com, online interviews were conducted within SINA’s largest environmental-themed circle—‘Environmental Protection Hand in Hand’, which had 570 members in August 2007. These online interviews aim to obtain a profile of individuals participating in environmental discussion in the blogosphere and to indicate the variety of motivations influencing bloggers’ contributions to this kind of online environmental community. There are 100 senior members, appointed by the Chief Webmaster of this blogging circle according to their contributions to the online community, such as the quantity and quality of their articles. All the senior members are online environmental activists who regularly post commentaries and essays in their blogs. A fully structured questionnaire of twelve questions in Chinese was sent to all the senior members. In total 32 completed responses were received from them about the current state of online environmental communication in China.

The interviewees cover all age groups with more than two-thirds between 18 and 60 years of age. Thirty out of thirty-two interviewees had a university education and good environmental understanding (one other was still at high school). The only non-university educated respondent is a retired worker, aged over 60 years.

Approximately 90% of the interviewees had read news articles about the lakebed-sealing case from online and offline sources. The respondents offered similar opinions about the lakebed sealing to those found on the BBS. However, they added more reflective (after the event) comments about the role of the media (see Table 3). Most respondents thought the public hearing and EIA processes about the controversy were positive moves by the Central Government and meaningful in the development of environmental democratisation. They also thought that the media had successfully drawn the public’s attention to this environmental conflict, providing a model for future resolutions to environmental controversies. However, two interviewees regarded them as ‘ridiculous cosmetic projects’. Only three interviewees wrote BBS messages about the lakebed-sealing case: that these educated, knowledgeable and Internet-using interviewees did not participate much in the online discussion on the lakebed-sealing case reveals the facts that online environmental communication in China is a new phenomenon and that conventional mass media are still dominant information sources to the majority of the Chinese population. On the other hand, some did participate in the discussion, in itself a new possibility.

As ‘Environmental Protection Hand in Hand’ was established in June 2006, interviewees have participated in this online community for periods of 2–12 months. The blogging circle was viewed as a good platform for members to exchange and share information on environmental protection, while some felt that the circle was ‘home-like’. Their expectations of the online community differ: ‘communicating with bloggers with similar interests on environmental protection’, ‘some activities can be organised’, ‘use the function of the new media, transfer the power of words to practical actions’. All of them agreed to different degrees that the rapid development of online environmental communities, environmental NGOs and mass media had promoted the process of environmental democratisation in China. As
individuals and Chinese citizens, they all thought that they have responsibility for conserving the environment. They believed they should take actions to learn more about the environment and use themselves to inspire the people around them. One interviewee pointed out that existing environmental organisations did not communicate well with each other, which could potentially be a factor preventing future collaboration between environmental organisations. The interviewees generally saw the recent transition in China’s environmental governance as an improvement. While considering environmental democratisation to be a positive transformation as a result of the interplay between the Central Government and the non-government sector, all the interviewees think that they will use their resources proactively to promote environmental protection in the communities around them both online and offline.

7. Discussion

The transition of environmental governance in China has been slow and ineffective until recently. Since the beginning of the Modernisation Phase in the early 1990s, the Central Government started to take environmental issues more seriously. For the past few years, the democratisation of China’s environmental governance regime has taken off, despite continued repression in other arenas of social debate. The lakebed-sealing case in 2005 is significant as a starting point for a new stage in the transformation. Although the Central Government is still dominant in managing the environment, the mass media and various types of environmental NGOs are being encouraged by SEPA to play more important roles in decision-making over the environment. The lakebed-sealing case has shown people how SEPA may resolve such environmental conflicts by introducing a public participation mechanism in the public hearing and the EIA report.

During the past 15 years, the transparency of China’s environmental governance has been increasing, while an effective environmental legal system has been established. During the past few years, institutional modifications were made to increase SEPA’s administrative capacity in managing the environment when the bureaucracy of environmental governance was found not sufficient to tackle many environmental problems. The non-government sectors, including the mass media and all types of environmental NGOs, are enjoying more freedom in reporting various environmental abuses and helping raise environmental awareness among the Chinese public, particularly with the assistance of the Internet. These facts suggest that the lakebed-sealing case was not a showcase but a turning point in the transformation of China’s environmental governance.
There are three caveats to this conclusion. The first is that Chinese government has become highly decentralised, and partly as a consequence local leaders have become economic actors in their own right, rather than simply agents of the state (Goodman, 2008). There is likely therefore to be variation in the conditions of environmental governance in different parts of the country, and perhaps at different spatial scales. Our conclusions about environmental democratisation perhaps apply most clearly to arenas in which the central government is most prominent. That said, people and the media are governed by the central government as well as by local governments and may seek to generalise the transformation of (central) environmental democratisation to more local states. Secondly, it is still early to tell whether the changes we have observed represent a permanent transformation. However, the lakebed-sealing case has demonstrated to people and governments that public involvement in decision taking can be effective. Thirdly, there is no evidence that public participation in the hearing, in the BSB, in the Eastern Horizon survey, or in the blogging circles had any effect on the outcome of the lakebed-sealing case. What all that participation has revealed—to SEPA and to people generally—is that there is widespread interest in environmental protection, anger at the lack of an EIA, and recognition of the importance of the rule of law. Together with the expressed cynicism about the value of public hearings, these surely encourage SEPA to invite more public participation in the future and to take public views into account.

It is evident that the environmental governance regime in China has become more open to public participation in the processes of environmental decision-making. The institutional and legal reforms within China’s environmental bureaucracy encourage this public engagement in environmental governance by tolerating criticisms from the mass media, environmental NGOs and individuals, particularly Internet users. This evolution of China’s environmental governance regime has accelerated after the lakebed-sealing case. More actions have been taken by the Chinese Central Government to effectively implement environmental regulations and laws in China, while both online and offline media coverage of environmental controversies have been fostered in order to provide public scrutiny in China’s ongoing environmental democratisation. This rise of public scrutiny signifies the Central Government’s conscious use of the emerging media and civic power to tackle crises in environmental governance. These recent transformations in China’s environmental governance regime are the outcomes of the interaction between government and non-government actors: both play vital parts in China’s environmental democratisation. The recent progress of democratising environmental governance could hardly have been achieved without all these contributors.

China’s current environmental democratisation is distinctive. When He (2006) investigated the Chinese path towards democracy, he posed an interesting question: whether it was a top-down approach of democratisation advanced by the Central Government, or a bottom-up path of democratic experiments that started first from the grassroots and local levels, and then gradually spread into more regions and upwards. Our evidence is that China’s environmental democratisation has adopted a hybrid approach with features of both top-down and bottom-up paths. With the shift of policy, the Central Government offers space for the rapid development of grassroots non-government stakeholders, such as the mass media and environmental NGOs. The mounting environmental demand from the grassroots reinforces the Central Government’s political will to democratise environmental governance. This interactive top-down and bottom-up relation between the Central Government and grassroots non-government stakeholders establishes a positive feedback loop to propel the future development of a democratic environmental governance regime in China.

REFERENCES


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