
In the Name of the Public: Environmental Protest and the Changing Landscape of Popular Contention in China

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-2000s, China has experienced a wave of large environmental protests against major economic development projects. Based on both interviews and documentary sources, this article examines four prominent cases and identifies four innovations in China's popular politics: broadened protest constituencies, mobilization for public goods, a proactive strategy to prevent government projects, and a mutual reinforcement of street mobilization and policy advocacy. These new traits of popular resistance have also begun to appear outside of the environmental arena. The way was paved for these innovations by transformations in the public sphere, a relative decrease in the risk of protest participation, and development of the environmental NGO sector. Although the new repertoire of contention appears in only some of China's abundant protests, it is becoming more widespread and in some cases influences government policy. Recent environmental protests may well stand at the forefront of broader changes in the landscape of Chinese sociopolitical activism and contentious politics.

Concerns over pollution and the environment have become some of the most important triggers in China's expanding sociopolitical contention.¹ Starting with a pioneering local campaign against a multibillion yuan paraxylene (PX) petrochemical plant in the eastern coastal city of Xiamen in 2007, the country has witnessed a series of large-scale protests against PX plants and other large-scale in-

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1. Xin Zhou and Henry Sanderson, "Chinese Anger over Pollution Becomes Main Cause of Social Unrest," *Bloomberg*, March 7, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-06/pollution-passes-land-grievances-as-main-spark-of-china-protests>, accessed July 29, 2015.

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dustrial and infrastructure projects.² The siting of waste treatment facilities on the outskirts of large cities has emerged as another common target of popular mobilization.³ According to a recent report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, environmental pollution has triggered half of the “mass incidents” (*qunti-xing shijian*) that attracted 10,000 or more participants between 2000 and 2013.⁴ No wonder that public ire over environmental problems has become a recurrent subject of media headlines and has caught the attention of the Chinese leadership.⁵ When addressing the opening session of the National People’s Congress in March 2014, Premier Li Keqiang accordingly declared “a war on pollution.”⁶

Research on these recent protests has shown how they are shaped by existing imperfect official channels for public participation⁷ and probed how communication technologies and framing strategies used by activists have affected the trajectories of individual cases.⁸ Scholars have also speculated that recent environmental

2. PX is an oil-based chemical product that is widely used in plastic bottles, polyester fiber, etc. Major protests occurred at Zhangzhou in Fujian Province in 2008, at Dalian in Liaoning Province in 2011, at Ningbo in Zhejiang Province in 2012, at Kunming in Yunnan Province in 2013, at Maoming in Guangdong Province in 2014, and at Jinshan in Shanghai municipality in 2015. The most widely reported protests involved an ethylene plant at Chengdu in Sichuan Province in 2008, a maglev train extension in Shanghai in 2008 that aroused concerns about health and falling property prices caused by radiation, coal power plants at Haimen in Guangdong Province and at Yinggehai in Hainan Province, a copper plant at Shifang in Sichuan Province, an industrial sewage pipeline at Qidong in Jiangsu Province in 2012, and a uranium-processing plant at Jiangmen in Guangdong Province in 2013.

3. Such protests occurred in Beijing’s Liulitun in 2006, Gao’antun in 2008, and Asuwei in 2009, Shanghai’s Caoluzhen in 2008, and Guangzhou’s Panyu and Huadu in 2009. Particularly in Guangdong Province, anti-incinerator protests and campaigns have spread beyond major cities, emerging in the outskirts of Dongguan and Foshan in 2010, and Huiyang in 2013.

4. Li Lin and Tian He, eds., *Zhongguo fazhi fazhan baogao* [Annual report on China’s rule of law] (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2014), 13–16.

5. On increasingly pro-environmental signals from the central authorities, see Rachel E. Stern, “The Political Logic of China’s New Environmental Courts,” *The China Journal*, no. 72 (July 2014): 53–74.

6. Ben Blanchard and David Stanway, “China to ‘Declare War’ on Pollution, Premier Says,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/us-china-parliament-pollution-idUSBREA2405W20140305>.

7. Thomas Johnson, “Environmentalism and NIMBYism in China: Promoting a Rules-Based Approach to Public Participation,” *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 3 (2010): 430–48, and “The Politics of Waste Incineration in Beijing: The Limits of a Top-Down Approach?” *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 15, no. 1 (2013): 109–28; Wanxin Li, Jieyan Liu, and Duoduo Li, “Getting Their Voices Heard: Three Cases of Public Participation in Environmental Protection in China,” *Journal of Environmental Management* 98 (2012): 65–72; Ran Ran, “Perverse Incentive Structure and Policy Implementation Gap in China’s Local Environmental Politics,” *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 15, no. 1 (2013): 17–39.

8. Ronggui Huang and Ngai-ming Yip, “Internet and Activism in Urban China: A Case Study of Protests in Xiamen and Panyu,” *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 11, no. 2 (2012): 201–23; Chin-Fu Hung, “Citizen Journalism and Cyberactivism in China’s Anti-PX Plant in Xiamen, 2007–2009,” *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (2013): 40–54; Jun Liu, “Mobile Communication, Popular Protests and Citizenship in China,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2013): 995–1018; Jian Lu and Chris King-Chi Chan, “Collective Identity, Framing, and Mobilization of Environmental Protest in Urban China: A Case Study of Qidong’s Protest,” *China: An International Journal* (2016, forthcoming); Thomas Johnson, “The Health Factor in Anti-Waste Incinerator Campaigns in Beijing and Guangzhou,” *China Quarterly*, no. 214 (2013): 356–75.

protests indicate a rising participatory demand among the middle class and signify the emergence of a fledgling version of ecological modernization in China.⁹ However, this ongoing wave of environmental contention has yet to feature prominently in the debates among China scholars who study continuity and change in China's contentious politics.¹⁰

This article will review key scholarly insights into the dominant pattern of contention in China since the 1990s and will use these as a conceptual lens to examine four cases of recent protests in the cities of Xiamen (2007), Nanjing (2011), Panyu (Guangzhou) (2009), and Kunming (2013). Combing through and comparing these episodes, the study identifies substantial deviations from the earlier protest repertoire in four dimensions—broadened protest constituencies, mobilization for public goods, a proactive and preventive strategy, and a mutual reinforcement of street mobilization and policy advocacy. What unites these changes in the very nature of protests is that the scope of participants and sphere of action have been substantially expanded. From a watershed event in Xiamen, where social elites and large numbers of citizens joined forces on a one-off basis, the new action repertoire has evolved to incorporate more substantial involvement and sustained policy advocacy by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Our case studies are based on interviews with protesters, officials, NGO staff, scholars, journalists, and local residents in Xiamen, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Beijing at various times between 2008 and 2013. We also draw on academic and mass media publications, photographic evidence, Internet sites, and mobile phone-based social media. The four case studies encompass all of the most common triggers of recent environmental protests, from the beginning of the new form of protests in the mid-2000s up through recent developments; they have also attained a high degree of public recognition. Our case selection allows us to capture innovations and the front line of an emerging and potentially significant sociopolitical phenomenon.¹¹ We will also explore the extent to which the common features of recent environmental protests have proliferated, and we will highlight

9. Graeme Lang and Ying Xu, "Anti-Incinerator Campaigns and the Evolution of Protest Politics in China," *Environmental Politics* 22, no. 5 (2013): 832–48; Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Middle-Class Mobilization," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 29–32.

10. See, e.g., Chris King-Chi Chan and Pun Ngai, "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China," *China Quarterly*, no. 198 (June 2009): 287–303; Manfred Elfstrom and Sarosh Kuruvilla, "The Changing Nature of Labor Unrest in China," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 67, no. 2 (2014): 453–80; Lianjiang Li, "Rights Consciousness and Rules Consciousness in Contemporary China," *The China Journal*, no. 64 (July 2010): 47–68; Elizabeth Perry, "A New Rights Consciousness?" *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 17–20.

11. On the importance of public interpretations of major events for repertoire changes, see Doug McAdam and William H. Sewell Jr., "It's About Time: Temporality in the Study of Social Movements and Revolution," in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. Ron Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell Jr., Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 118. On the usefulness of studying "extreme cases," see David Collier and James Mahoney, "Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 72–75.

the important contextual conditions that have paved the way for these protests and that often have succeeded in changing state behavior. The article's conclusion deliberates on the broader significance of the observed repertoire changes for Chinese politics.

POPULAR CONTENTION SINCE THE EARLY 1990s

After the forceful repression of the Tian'anmen movement, the intellectual-led and idealistic repertoire of contention of the 1980s came to an end.¹² A form of collective resistance that centered on everyday grievances came to the foreground in the early 1990s and ushered in a new stage of contention in China.¹³ A large body of literature has examined the main features of this still dominant repertoire, and four defining characteristics stand out.¹⁴

First, narrow protest constituencies: until the new protest repertoire emerged, almost all of the protests in China have been "cellular" and relatively small, staged in the name of separate and narrow constituencies that are linked through pre-existing social ties in villages, factories, and residential compounds or ethnic identity.¹⁵ Even resisting groups with very similar grievances have very rarely joined forces across social and geographical boundaries. The last available figures released by the authorities for the period prior to 2004 further illustrate this point. They showed that the mean number of participants per incident had continuously declined from 73 in 1994 to 51 in 2003. Only 12 percent of the protests in 2003 included more than 100 participants.¹⁶

Second, exclusive mobilizing grievances: before the new repertoire arose, the shared discontent that propelled people into collective action almost always hinged predominantly on factors bearing on protesters' immediate—frequently

12. We adopt Charles Tilly's definition in this article and understand repertoires of contention as "shared scripts" of "claim-making routines" that have a "clustered, learned, yet improvisational character." Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 35.

13. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 24.

14. Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Kevin J. O'Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance*; Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

15. Lee, *Against the Law*, 9; Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, *Taxation without Representation in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 157; Xi Chen, *Social Protest*, 212; Elizabeth Perry, "Permanent Rebellion? Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Protest," in O'Brien, *Popular Protest in China*, 206.

16. H. Christoph Steinhardt, "How Rebellious Is Chinese Society? An Analysis of Official Figures and Survey Data," EAI Background Brief, no. 853 (2013): 1–18, East Asian Institute, Singapore.

monetary—interests.¹⁷ The outcomes of successful cases of this type of resistance, such as compensation for requisitioned or polluted farmland or damaged health, restoration of residential and property rights, or better pay or better working conditions in a factory, have usually been restricted to the members of the protest constituencies. It is crucial to note here that the exclusive nature of such outcomes characterized them, in the language of rational choice analysts, as private or club goods, but not public goods.¹⁸ As a partial result of such narrow protest constituencies and specified and exclusive mobilizing grievances, solidarity and support from the larger public have typically been very limited.

Third, ex post facto resistance: protests since the 1990s have typically sought compensation, or nominal retrospective justice, for a controversial act that had not only already occurred but often also had resulted in significant personal harm. Such victimhood-driven resistance has typically evolved out of petitions, complaints, lawsuits, or other forms of seeking redress for acts that ran counter to existing laws, policies, or norms. Although resisters, when successfully mobilized, sometimes successfully pressed for concessions, these have been confined to “the realm of policy implementation” and remained largely excluded from the domain of policy making.¹⁹ The ex post facto sequence has been rooted in a lack of access to information and decision-making processes. It also implied resisters’ weak ability to advocate for broader public awareness of their specific grievance and to prevent it from happening again.²⁰

Fourth, the separation of protest and policy advocacy: paralleling the increase of “mass incidents,” policy advocacy efforts to change state behavior have also been on the rise, led by elites such as journalists, academics, NGO officials, entrepreneurs, and even reform-minded government officials.²¹ The elite and NGO activists were particularly cautious to not get involved with grassroots mobilization, and protests were almost universally characterized by an absence of effective

17. On mobilizing grievances, see Remy Cross and David A. Snow, “Social Movements,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (Chichester: Wiley, 2011), 524.

18. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

19. O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 122.

20. On the sequence of resistance, see Yongshun Cai, “Collective Ownership or Cadres’ Ownership? The Non-agricultural Use of Farmland in China,” *China Quarterly*, no. 175 (2003): 662–80. For the typical pattern of environmental protests, see Jun Jing, “Environmental Protests in Rural China,” in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, 197–214. For a rare example of a preventive protest, see Yanhua Deng and Guobin Yang, “Pollution and Protest in China: Environmental Mobilization in Context,” *China Quarterly*, no. 214 (2013): 321–36.

21. Yihong Jiang, “Altering the Rules: Chinese Homeowners’ Participation in Policymaking,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2013): 121–48; Scott Kennedy, *The Business of Lobbying in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Andrew Mertha, “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process,” *China Quarterly*, no. 200 (2009): 995–1012; Shaoguang Wang, “Changing Models of China’s Policy Agenda Setting,” *Modern China* 34, no. 1 (2008): 56–87; Fengshi Wu, “Strategic State Engagement in Transnational Activism: AIDS Prevention in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 621–37.

policy advocacy.²² Occasionally, protesters sought support from sympathetic elite allies, just as policy advocates used the specter of grassroots unrest to make their case for reforms.²³ But in the overall landscape of social contention, until recently there was a substantial separation between these two realms of actors and activities.

The following four cases of environmental protests since the mid-2000s illustrate a recent divergence from the above four characteristics so substantial that they deserve to be distinguished as representing a new repertoire.

A TRANSFORMATIVE EVENT: THE ANTI-PX PROTESTS IN XIAMEN

In July 2006, the National Development and Reform Commission formally endorsed plans to build a multibillion yuan PX plant near a new residential area in Haicang, a suburb of Xiamen. The decision was made in spite of an earlier demand by the Fujian Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau and the State Environmental Protection Administration (the precursor to the Ministry of Environmental Protection) to “adjust” (*tiaozheng*) the development plans, which would have implied a relocation of the PX project.²⁴ When a Xiamen University professor who was then a delegate to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference learned about the National Development and Reform Commission’s decision, she decided to take action. After fruitless communication with the Xiamen government through personal connections, she organized the drafting of a motion at the annual Consultative Conference meeting in Beijing in March 2007 that called for relocating the plant, on the grounds that the project was too close to residential areas and posed a high accident risk for the wider Xiamen public. Although the motion was ultimately not adopted, she managed to obtain support from 105 fellow delegates, among them the deputy governor of Fujian Province. This provided the necessary legitimacy for coverage in the national commercial news media and spurred other local advocates to chime in. Substantial media coverage and online agitation over health threats soon began to emerge. By late May,

22. Research has even found that NGOs and policy advocates are sometimes allied with or embedded in local governmental agencies rather than leading or representing policy victims. Peter Ho, “Embedded Activism and Political Change in a Semi-authoritarian Context,” *China Information* 21, no. 2 (2007): 187–209; Jessica C. Teets, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Guobin Yang, “Environmental NGOs and Institutional Dynamics in China,” *China Quarterly*, no. 181 (2005): 46–66.

23. O’Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance*, 13; Fayong Shi and Yongshun Cai, “Disaggregating the State: Networks and Collective Resistance in Shanghai,” *China Quarterly*, no. 186 (2006): 314–32; H. Christoph Steinhardt, “State Behavior and the Intensification of Intellectual Criticism in China: The Social Stability Debate,” *Modern China* (2015), doi:10.1177/0097700415581158.

24. Jiaoming Pang, “Xiamen PX xiangmu daikuan keneng zaocheng daizhang, shi chang bu duideng boyi” [The Xiamen PX project might result in bad debts, the playing field is not fair], *Zhongguo Jingji Shibao* [China economic times], June 6, 2007.

calls for protests from anonymous sources circulated on mobile phones and online discussion forums.²⁵ On June 1 and 2, 2007, two largely peaceful demonstrations with several thousand participants each, playfully titled on the Internet as “collective strolling” (*jiti sanbu*), marched through Xiamen’s city center.²⁶ In response, the State Environmental Protection Administration conducted another environmental impact assessment of the PX project, followed by a public hearing. By December 2007, the project was shelved.

In addition to the large protest turnout, the preventive nature of resistance, and the unusual outcome, what most distinguished this from the majority of protests at the time was its broad constituency. Protesters claimed to speak not for a narrow subset of citizens, but for the general public of this major city. And that claim seemed to have resonated. Individual demonstrators’ accounts and photographic evidence reveal an outpouring of sympathy from large crowds of bystanders and even occasional acts of sympathy from police officers on the days of the protests.²⁷ Interviews and conversations with dozens of Xiamen residents from all walks of life also suggest that although some had reservations about taking to the streets, support for the cause was virtually unanimous.²⁸ Members of the Xiamen diaspora elsewhere in China showed support online before and after the protests.²⁹ Widespread positive reporting in the news media reflected and in turn further generated evident sympathy from all over the nation.³⁰

The primary mobilizing grievance and dominant narrative of the Xiamen anti-PX campaign was anchored in public concerns about the potential impact of air pollution and industrial accidents on the whole city. A second and much more exclusive type of grievance was the fear of Haicang residents that the value of

25. The messages (on file with the authors) appealed to the common identity of “*Xiamen renmin*” (the people of Xiamen), asserted that the PX plant would bring about dramatic deteriorations of health, and falsely claimed that international organizations had determined such projects could only be built at least 100 kilometers outside of residential areas.

26. One journalistic estimate mentioned 30,000 participants (Didi Kirsten Tatlow and Joey Liu, “Thousands Protest against Chemical Plant in Xiamen,” *South China Morning Post*, February 2, 2007, <http://www.scmp.com/article/595260/thousands-protest-against-chemical-plant-xiamen>, accessed June 19, 2014. The first author’s interview with a protest participant on June 10, 2007, elicited a similar estimate. A Chinese survey study reports a 10.8 percent participation rate of three districts in Xiamen with a combined population of over 1.4 million, pushing the number of participants even higher. Zhijia Zhou, “Huanjing baohu, quanti yali, haishi liyi boji: xiamen jumin PX huanjing yundong canyu xingwei de dongji fenxi” [Environmental protection, group pressure or interests? An analysis of the motivations for participating in the Xiamen PX citizen environmental movement], *Shehui* [Society] 31, no. 1 (2011): 1–34.

27. The authors are in possession of 269 original photographs that were taken by a protest participant.

28. The first author’s interviews and informal conversations during several weeks research stay in Xiamen in May, June, and September 2008.

29. Xu Liu, “Fan PX wangmin ‘Xiamen Lang’ huo niandu wangluo gongmin da jiang” [Netizen opposing PX “Xiamen wave” receives annual internet citizen award], *Nanfang Dushi Bao* [Southern metropolis news], January 14, 2008.

30. For example, Fangqing Shao, “Yige chengshi de taidu” [A city’s attitude], *Diyi Caijing Ribao* [No. 1 finance daily], April 18, 2007.

their residential properties would decline if the project was built, but a Chinese survey study found that residence or property ownership in Haicang had no significant impact on protest participation.³¹ A large number of anecdotal statements by ordinary citizens and slogans used by protesters suggest that supporters of the anti-PX campaign were discontented with the drive for “political performance” (*zhengji*) by the local government that only focused on gross domestic product (GDP) growth and not the public welfare, and linked this governmental mentality with the decision on the PX project.³² A discursively reinforced identity of “Xiamen people” (*Xiamen ren*)³³ inhabiting an intangible and collectively owned “beautiful Xiamen” (*meili de Xiamen*) that was under threat and thus required citizens to “defend the beautiful home” (*baowei meili jiayuan*)³⁴ became viral online and was present throughout the protests. Thus, while mobilizing grievances were obviously mixed, it is evident that what spurred thousands of people to the streets went substantially beyond exclusive concerns of a narrow subset of the population. Those who took part in the protest did so for issues that could affect not only themselves and the people they knew personally but also millions of unknown fellow Xiamen citizens and the future of the entire city.

Also notable in this case was the mutual reinforcement of policy advocacy and street protests. Before and after the large demonstrations in June 2007, local elites conducted extensive policy advocacy. A local blogger who was a *Southern Weekend Magazine* columnist republished key media reports and pamphlets on his widely read blog, urging locals to discuss the PX project on the Internet and in private and fostering a shared grievance and identity.³⁵ While it is difficult to imagine that the massive protests would have taken place without elite advocacy, it is similarly hard to envision that city authorities would have eventually backed down without a show of force on the streets. However, a notable distance between these two spheres of advocacy remained. Some local advocates participated in the demonstrations but were careful not to call for protests directly. The main environmental NGO in the city, the Xiamen Green Cross Association, publicly declared its neutrality on the matter.³⁶ The NGO got involved only after

31. Surprisingly neither did the perceived threat of pollution or dissatisfaction with the state of the local environment. What mattered most, according to this study, was if residents gave or received pressure to participate from peers. See Zhou, “Environmental Protection.”

32. The first author’s interviews with a Haicang resident on September 16, 2008. The authors have photographic evidence of anti-GDP protest slogans on file.

33. Huan Weng, “Xiamen ren: Yi yongqi he lixing zhuzhao weilai” [Xiamen residents: With bravery and rationality enlightening the future], *Nanfang Zhoumo* [Southern weekly], December 17, 2007; Zhou, “Environmental Protection,” 23. The first author also interviewed two Xiamen officials and academics and heard similar comments, September 20, 2008.

34. The authors have relevant photographic evidence of protest slogans on file.

35. The complete set of his blog posts during the campaign is on file with the authors.

36. The second author’s interview with the executive director of the NGO in Beijing on May 20, 2011.

institutionalized public participation had become possible in the State Environmental Protection Administration's renewed environmental impact assessment.³⁷ The evidence strongly suggests that the successful mutual reinforcement between elite advocacy and mass protests was not the result of strategic planning but the outcome of an intersection of simultaneously evolving processes.

The anti-PX campaign in Xiamen in 2007 was a “transformative event” in which longer-term structural changes provided the opportunity to innovate contentious strategies and significantly change the popular imagination of what a protest can look like and achieve.³⁸ The very idea that an alliance of social elites and average citizens in a proactive preventive campaign in the name of the public against a major state-backed project is not only possible, but can be successful, was born in Xiamen and has since taken root in China. Based upon the template of Xiamen, the following three episodes pushed this new model further.

FROM POLLUTION TO A COMMON HERITAGE: THE TREE-SAVING CAMPAIGN IN NANJING

In February 2011, some Nanjing citizens were disturbed by what they saw on the streets. During the construction of a subway station, a number of phoenix trees (*wutong shu*) that lined the inner city streets and hailed back to the Republican Era were cut down. Citizens soon began to express their discontent over this destruction, and the “Nanjing Wutong Tree Salvation” microblog group was formed.³⁹ Before long, a number of local prominent figures chimed in on the Internet, and the news media began critical reporting, highlighting that over 600 trees were to be felled according to the plans for a new subway line.⁴⁰ Various symbolic means of resistance began to emerge, for example, tying green ribbons to trees and putting stickers on cars with tree-saving logos and slogans.⁴¹ Following calls on the Internet, in March a few hundred people gathered for a peaceful sit-in (*jingzuo*) in front of the city library under the watchful gaze of numerous police officers.⁴² On the following day, local authorities gave in and

37. Fanxu Zeng and Zhigao Jiang, “Xiamen shimin PX de PK zhan” [Xiamen residents’ war against PX], *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan* [Southern people weekly], December 28, 2007.

38. McAdam and Sewell, “It’s About Time,” 118.

39. Op Ed, “Nanjing ‘wutong ranglu’ shijian” [The Nanjing “phoenix trees making way for (subway)” incident], *Xuanjiangjia* [Orator] website, January 22, 2013, <http://www.71.cn/2013/0122/702309.shtml>, accessed July 8, 2014.

40. Haiyong Li, “Nanjing 40 duo ke shu bei ‘ti guangtou’ zhi wei ditie xian rang dao” [Nanjing: More than 40 trees having their “heads shaved” to give way for subway line], *Yangzi Wanbao* [Yangzi evening news], March 1, 2011.

41. One of these stickers read: “Ai wo gudu, baowei wutong” (Love my old city, defend plane trees). Photographic evidence is on file with the authors.

42. Sharon Lafraniere, “Nanjing Fights to Save Its London Plane ‘Supertrees,’” *New York Times*, June 4, 2011.

announced that the construction plan for the underground railway would be altered to preserve the city's venerable trees. Two-thirds of the trees originally to be removed were saved because of Nanjing citizens' various forms of peaceful contention.

As in the case of Xiamen, people mobilized for a public good. It is not meaningful to argue that the loss of the wutong trees would have affected the people who participated in the sit-in, or tied a ribbon on a tree, more than others. The incident stood out precisely because the trees had no significant material impact on their private lives or possessions. The phoenix trees were perceived as being a symbol of Nanjing with an intangible value that belonged to the public. One Internet user wrote passionately:

To us the phoenix trees are not simply trees; they have nourished one generation after another from Nanjing, and as a whole they cannot be taken from our hearts [*geshe bu liao de qingjie*]. Nanjing residents take action! Let our voices be heard!⁴³

Some Internet commentators even claimed that the trees had to be defended not only in the name of Nanjing but in the name of the entire nation, as Nanjing was a "jewel in the heart of every Chinese person."⁴⁴

The act of protecting the trees unleashed broader discussions of what should be the ultimate goal of development. As one Internet user remarked, "Please respect what history preserved for us," followed by a rhetorical question: "Does economic development really have to override everything else?" Another user wondered, "Without the ancient trees, what is left of the ancient city?"⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, given what was phrased as a noble cause, the campaign gathered nationwide solidarity and support. During its high tide, the topic "Concern for Nanjing Plane Trees" attracted 400,000–500,000 posts per day and was among the hottest ones on Sina microblog.⁴⁶

Similar to Xiamen, it is difficult to envision street mobilization without the participation of social elites. Likewise, without the combination of elite advocacy and street mobilization, the final outcome may well have been different.

43. Online post, "Guanzhu Nanjing wutong shu de kanfa" [Pay attention to the cutting phoenix tress in Nanjing], *Tianya Luntan* (BBS site), January 2011, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-2114996-1.shtml>, accessed July 8, 2014.

44. Online post, "Wutong shu shang de lüsedai" [Green ribbons on phoenix trees], *Xici Hutong* (BBS site), <http://www.xici.net/d143135723.htm>, March 2011, accessed July 8, 2014.

45. "Guanzhu Nanjing wutong shu beikan shijian" [Pay attention to the Nanjing phoenix tress cutting incident], *Wangyi Weibo* (microblog), Hot Event, March 2011, <http://t.163.com/zt/pub/njwts?f=event.hot>, accessed July 8, 2014.

46. Yiman Liu, "Nanjing: wutong shu xia, yi zheng fenglei" [Nanjing: Wind and thunder under the phoenix trees], *Dongfang Zhoukan* [Eastern weekly], November 4, 2011; Xuanyao Zhu, "Nanjing wutong baowei zhan: Weibo de you yici shengli" [The Nanjing phoenix tree defense campaign: Another triumph of microblogs], *Nanfang Ribao* [Southern daily], March 17, 2011.

Public figures such as well-known football commentator Huang Jianxiang and television host Meng Fei, other journalists, and NGOs played a reinforcing role. A Nanjing University professor even openly called for Nanjing mayor Ji Jianye to be “impeached.”⁴⁷ A local NGO, Green Stone, got involved directly by organizing a successful online campaign asking citizens to take their pictures in front of wutong trees and to post them online as a way of expressing their discontent with the tree-cutting policy.⁴⁸ This microblog-based strategy of symbolic action emulated one developed by an activist sociologist a few weeks earlier.⁴⁹ Advocacy even came from outside of the People’s Republic of China when Chiu Yi, a member of the central standing committee of Taiwan’s Kuomintang Party, posted microblog comments and directly communicated his concern for the phoenix trees to the Nanjing mayor.⁵⁰

In the anti-tree-cutting campaign, the repertoire of Xiamen had been adopted and developed further. As in Xiamen, the campaign was conducted in the name of all of the city’s residents as a public good; resistance kicked in before the city government’s project had become irreversible; and protest and elite advocacy reinforced each other. Substantial further innovation was obvious as well. This time around, citizens took action for an evidently symbolic and immaterial asset, extending their environmental concerns beyond pollution and toxins. They employed a larger and more imaginative and playful range of contentious acts and drew in active support from an NGO as well as netizens and prominent figures from around the nation.

FROM PROTEST TO THE BIRTH OF A NEW NGO: ANTI-INCINERATOR ACTIVISM IN PANYU

Panyu, a newly developed satellite district (a former rural county) 30 kilometers south of the city of Guangzhou, is home to over 800,000 residents. In September 2009, some homeowners in a residential complex (*xiaoqu*) in Panyu learned that a waste incinerator was to be built in their neighborhood. These homeowners, who included a number of journalists, public servants, and retired bureaucrats, soon began signing petitions and displaying slogans on buildings in the neighborhood to express their worries about potential pollution and health

47. Renminwang, “Ji Jianye tiba daziyuan qingfu dang Yangzhou shi fagaiwei fu zhuren” [Ji Jianye promoted his secretary mistress to deputy chairwomen of the development and reform commission of Yangzhou City], Renminwang [People’s net], October 23, 2013, <http://news.china.com/domestic/945/20131029/18115985.html>, accessed August 25, 2015.

48. The second author’s interview with Green Stone staff in Nanjing, June 12, 2012.

49. Fengshi Wu and Shen Yang, “Web 2.0 and Political Engagement in China,” *VOLUNTAS* (July 2015), doi:10.1007/s11266-015-9627-6.

50. Si Meng, “The Battle for Nanjing’s Trees,” *China Dialogue*, March 30, 2011, <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/4191-The-battle-for-Nanjing-s-trees>.

hazards.⁵¹ Representatives of the Panyu campaign paid a visit to Likeng village in the northeastern outskirts of Guangzhou, where the first waste incinerating facility in southern China had been built in 2000 and had since caused recurrent protests. After the trip, Panyu residents became much better informed about the potential effects of living in close proximity to a waste incinerator and more determined to resist having one operate at their doorstep.⁵² In November 2009, over a thousand residents from both Panyu and Likeng staged a demonstration in front of the Guangzhou municipal government building and requested to meet with leading officials. After a few more “collective petitions” (*jiti xinfang*) were submitted, in December 2009 the District Party Secretary met with representatives of Panyu residents and promised to halt the project.

The campaign and local mobilization did not stop after district authorities showed signs of giving in. Panyu campaigners had realized by then that re-siting or rejecting a single incinerator was not a sustainable solution to the problem of urban solid waste. Being geographically close to large cities like Guangzhou, suburban areas face the long-term threat of becoming the “dumping ground” of wastes. But with the Guangzhou Asian Games approaching in late 2010, governmental authorities in Guangdong Province tightened social control, and anti-incinerator activism in Panyu almost came to a standstill. At that time, Friends of Nature, joined by other Beijing-based groups such as the Green Beagle Environmental Institute and the Nature University, stepped up their support for Panyu activists. After months of mentorship and grooming, Basuo Fengyun (a blog name), one of the most active participants in the earlier petitions and protests, eventually became the public face of the Panyu group. Basuo Fengyun and his followers soon redirected their focus onto a new round of governmental decision making for the siting of the pending incinerator that was no longer related to Panyu district. In 2011, he won the prestigious SEE-TNC Ecological Award, which provided necessary financial resources, moral endorsement, and peer support to continue advocacy for alternative waste treatment methods. Basuo Fengyun and fellow activists finally came to realize that public participation in the siting of an incinerator and establishing sustainable waste treatment facilities in China still had a long way to go and that it would be impossible for them to monitor governmental decisions on a regular basis and be part of future policy making without a formal organizational structure.⁵³ Thus, in the spring of 2012 they formed an NGO and named it Eco Canton (Yiju Guangzhou).

51. Lang and Xu, “Anti-Incinerator Campaigns,” 838; Natalie W. M. Wong, “Advocacy Coalitions and Policy Change in China: A Case Study of Anti-incinerator Protest in Guangzhou,” *VOLUNTAS* (May 2015), doi:10.1007/s11266-015-9603-1.

52. The second author’s interview with Basuo Fengyun, the leader of the Panyu campaign, in Guangzhou on September 21, 2012.

53. The second author’s interview with Basuo Fengyun in Shenzhen on September 23, 2013.

Since its establishment, Eco Canton has been embedded in a network of environmental NGOs, activist-minded lawyers, university professors, and relatively progressive media outlets in Guangzhou.⁵⁴ In cooperation with a center at Zhongshan University, it completed a survey of 15 waste sorting and recycling programs in Guangzhou, which formed the basis for a convincing report with policy recommendations for the municipal government. The Guangzhou governmental agency responsible for urban planning accepted the recommendations and formulated a guideline for residential community-based waste sorting and recycling.

Eco Canton has close organizational links to leading environmental NGOs in Beijing and is part of the Zero Waste Alliance funded by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives—an NGO alliance that aims at policy advocacy for sustainable waste treatment at the national level. Other NGOs and governmental agencies from different cities often invite Basuo Fengyun to present the case of Panyu and Guangzhou and to share the experience of solving controversies related to waste treatment siting.⁵⁵ At the same time, Eco Canton continues to play a role as an information disseminator for ordinary citizens in their resistance to industrial pollution and for waste management policies beyond Guangzhou. It has become an influential cross-regional player in policy advocacy for urban waste management and antipollution protests elsewhere.

The Panyu anti-incinerator campaign and the establishment of Eco Canton highlight a further closing of the gap between street protests and policy advocacy. Starting with a narrow constituency and mobilizing around an exclusive grievance, substantial involvement of activists from Beijing led the initial campaign to evolve and eventually turn into an NGO and a long-term policy advocacy initiative that treats urban waste as a public good and pushes for broad public participation in policy reforms. The resulting activism involved public education, policy recommendations, and social mobilization for urban waste management with attention from and outreach to partners in different parts of the country and even overseas. Thus, the intersection of protest and advocacy in Panyu has had more substantial policy implications than the two previous cases.

NGO ADVOCACY ON THE FRONTLINE: THE ANTI-PX CAMPAIGN IN KUNMING

In March 2013, the Kunming municipal government announced that a PX project in Anning Industrial Park, 32 kilometers southwest of the city center, had

54. Fengshi Wu, "Environmental Activism in Provincial China," *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 15, no. 1 (2013): 89–108.

55. Eco-Canton's official microblog site, <http://weibo.com/u/2738146140>, accessed July 11, 2014; Wong, "Advocacy Coalition," 7–10.

received approval from the National Development and Reform Commission. In April, two local NGOs, Green Watershed and Green Kunming, conducted a field investigation of the proposed project site.⁵⁶ Through the Internet and social media portals, these two NGOs then expressed serious concerns about the siting of the project and its potential impact on air quality in Kunming. Word spread quickly, and soon calls for “a civilized collective outing” (*wenming jiti chuxing*) against the PX project appeared in various websites, social networking portals, and microblogs.⁵⁷ Headed by a few well-known environmentalists and NGO leaders, a petition (with real names and identity card numbers) against the project also spread widely via WeChat, a cell phone-based social media application.⁵⁸ Some residents filed formal applications for holding a demonstration and posted these online with their real names.⁵⁹ Despite various attempts to keep students and state employees from participating, two large demonstrations, each with a few thousand participants from diverse backgrounds, took place on May 4 and May 16. On June 2, Kunming’s mayor finally announced that the project would not commence without a comprehensive public consultation process. The Ministry of Environmental Protection released the PX project’s environmental impact assessment report on June 28, which temporarily put the project on hold.

In many aspects, this and other anti-PX protests since 2007 resemble the Xiamen case discussed earlier. Citizens mobilized in the name of all Kunming residents, taking to the streets with concerns that are public in nature: clean air in the “spring city” (*chuncheng*) and discontent over a GDP-driven local government, a lack of transparency in public policy making, and a perceived irresolvable contradiction between investment in petrochemical industry and Kunming’s role as a tourism destination.⁶⁰ However, what sets Kunming apart from Xiamen and other anti-PX protests is the role played by local NGOs before, during, and after the protests. This is largely due to the fact that Kunming and Yunnan Province have a better-developed NGO community compared with other parts of China, particularly in the field of environmental protection.⁶¹

56. Newsletters appear on Green Kunming’s official website, <http://www.greenkm.org/detail/914.htm>, accessed January 31, 2014.

57. “No PX! Fangzhi wumai, baowei Kunming! Baowei meili chuncheng!” [No PX! Prevent haze, defend Kunming! Defend the beautiful spring city!] Tianya Luntan [Tianya discussion forum], April 2013, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-62-578140-2.shtml>, accessed June 12, 2014.

58. The authors have evidence of the petition and its content on file.

59. “Kunming shimin tiyi faqi kangyi PX xiangmu luohu youxing weishi” [Kunming residents suggest launching a demonstration to protest the PX project], *Wei quanwang*, March 26, 2013, <http://www.wei quanwang.org/?p=33959>, accessed June 12, 2014.

60. The authors have a collection of relevant online discourses on file.

61. Yunnan has the largest number of environmental NGOs at the provincial level nationwide (Wu, “Environmental Activism,” 91). NGOs and social activism in Yunnan Province have been studied widely by social scientists (Berthold Kuhn, “Government-NGO Cooperation in the People’s Republic of China: Experiences from Yunnan Province,” *International Journal of Civil Society Law* 4, no. 3 [2006]: 62–72; Ralph

Founded in 1998, Green Watershed is one of the most active and influential green NGOs in Yunnan Province and the nation. It has played a crucial part since 2004 in a public campaign against the construction of a large dam in the Nu River,⁶² and more generally it conducts research, advocacy campaigns, and community-based pilot projects in the fields of nature conservation and sustainable energy. Green Kunming has a less high profile and only began its work in environmental education in 2006. By 2012, a new board had been established, and several prominent activists and social leaders joined Green Kunming. This enhanced its visibility and operational capacity and prepared the organization to move toward campaigning and policy advocacy. These two NGOs were familiar with each other and had collaborated before the anti-PX campaign.⁶³ Green Watershed was the first to investigate the PX project proposal in Kunming after the Ministry of Environmental Protection had given it the green light in July 2012, and Green Kunming joined the mission in early 2013. Their joint field investigation in April 2013 and subsequent mobilization ignited widespread public discussions of the project and eventually the protests in May.

The two NGOs did not stop when the city government announced concessions due to the pressure generated by the two peaceful protests. Having learned from previous anti-PX cases and understanding that the lack of national-level policy advocacy had allowed officials to relocate proposals for PX and other polluting industries further into rural areas, Green Watershed, Green Kunming, and other local activists, supported by Friends of Nature, Nature University, and a few other veteran Beijing-based environmental organizations, launched a coalition to push for reassessing the siting of all petrochemical projects in Anning and for a more transparent decision-making process, which would allow for public monitoring and consultation in deciding any future PX projects.⁶⁴ After the Ministry of Environmental Protection had suspended the Kunming PX project, this NGO coalition organized a press conference in Beijing and urged authorities to release more information about all ongoing projects of the China National Petroleum Cooperation (the PX project's primary investor) and encouraged a comprehensive round of environmental assessments of the planning at the Anning Industrial Park. These NGOs also initiated an "ICARE Kunming"

Litzinger, "The Mobilization of 'Nature': Perspectives from North-west Yunnan," *China Quarterly*, no. 178 [2004]: 488–504; Katherine Morton, "The Emergence of NGOs in China and Their Transnational Linkages: Implications for Domestic Reform," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 59, no. 4 [2005]: 519–32; Anthony J. Spires, Lin Tao, and Kin-man Chan, "Societal Support for China's Grass-Roots NGOs: Evidence from Yunnan, Guangdong and Beijing," *The China Journal*, no. 71 [January 2014]: 65–90.

62. The 2006 Goldman Environmental Prize was awarded to the founder of Green Watershed, Dr. Yu Xiaogang, for this effort. He was the second Chinese recipient of this award.

63. The second author conducted telephone interviews with Green Watershed and Green Kunming in April 2012.

64. The second author's interview in Beijing during January 2013 with Friends of Nature staff members, who were in collaboration with GW throughout the Kunming anti-PX campaign.

program calling on all concerned citizens across the country to pay attention to PX projects and the broader issue of environmental protection in China.⁶⁵

Since the 2013 public protests, Green Watershed and Green Kunming have identified monitoring of petrochemical projects in Anning and mobilizing of the public to participate in environmental assessment processes as their organizational priority. The two NGOs have since taken on the role of environmental watchdogs for Kunming and Yunnan by publishing regular field study reports, making official documentation and data publicly available, and discussing policy alternatives. They are part of a growing activism network across the country that focuses on public access to environmental information and public participation in industrial pollution reduction.⁶⁶ The network makes full use of the legal status of the national government's Measures for Open Environmental Information (for Trial Implementation), enacted in 2008, and NGO members of this network monitor industrial pollution in their regions by encouraging broad public participation in environmental information sharing and publicizing.⁶⁷

The Kunming anti-PX protest has pushed the repertoire earlier developed in Xiamen further in terms of protest-policy advocacy linkages. The case demonstrates the pronounced effect NGO advocacy can have when it intersects with broader citizen mobilization. Although the two leading NGOs did not directly organize street protests, the information they disseminated was critical for setting public debate in motion and providing vital argumentative ammunition that allowed the resistance ultimately to be successful. Due to the two local groups and an experienced cross-regional coalition of environmental NGOs, the Kunming anti-PX campaign went beyond large-scale but one-off protest and evolved into ongoing policy advocacy for transparency and public participation in environmental governance beyond Kunming.

THE NEW REPERTOIRE, ITS SPREAD AND CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS

Table 1 summarizes the innovations and outlines the points of departure from the preexisting pattern of popular protest. Instead of closely knit groups of victims and their personal supporters, the new type of resistance mobilizes large numbers of people unknown to each other. In contrast to the pursuit of exclusive benefits, the new repertoire revolves around public goods, policy concerns,

65. This press conference document was supplied by the Friends of Nature to the authors.

66. In addition to the two Kunming NGOs, this coalition includes grassroots NGOs, such as the Institute for Public and Environmental Affairs in Beijing, Green Stone in Nanjing, the Wuhu Ecology Center in Anhui Province, and Green Hunan in Changsha.

67. For a complete English translation, http://www.epa.gov/ogc/china/open_environmental.pdf; available at <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-on-open-environmental-information-trial-cecc-full-translation>.

Table 1. A Comparison of the Earlier Repertoire of Contention and New Innovations

	Main Repertoire since the 1990s	The New Repertoire since the Mid-2000s
Protest constituencies	Narrow, closely knit communities of “victims”	Broad “imagined communities” of cities or regions
Mobilizing grievances	Exclusive (private)	Nonexclusive (public)
Sequence of resistance	Ex post facto	Preventive
Protest and policy advocacy	Hardly any linkages	Mutual reinforcement; sometimes sustained advocacy with NGO participation

or symbolic values relevant to a broad “imagined community” of a city or even the whole country.⁶⁸ And, rather than taking action ex post facto, protest campaigns seek to prevent governmental acts perceived as harmful from being implemented in the first place (or carried out in full, as in the case of Nanjing). Finally, the gap between those who protest and those who engage in policy advocacy has narrowed substantially. The most obvious innovation since Xiamen in 2007 was that NGOs began to play a larger role. In the latter two cases, protest evolved into NGO-driven longer-term policy monitoring and public education.

How widespread are the innovations of popular resistance summarized in table 1? Although the concurrence of all four elements has been most pronounced in the cases analyzed above, they have emerged to different extents in protests across geographic locations and issue domains. In the environmental domain, all of the major anti-PX or anti-industrial development protests in urban areas (e.g., Chengdu in 2008, Dalian in 2011, Ningbo and Shifang in 2012, Jiangmen in 2013, Maoming in 2014, and Heyuan and Jinshan in 2015) mobilized large numbers of residents to prevent pollution threats that would have affected all of the citizens in these localities. Wider solidarity from outside the specific places has been frequent.⁶⁹ At the intersection of protest and policy advocacy, protesters against a power plant in Heyuan (2015) were reportedly spurred into action by a TV presenter’s attention-generating advocacy documentary on air pollution, *Under the Dome*, released a few weeks earlier.⁷⁰ The linkage between NGOs and protests has grown most visibly in the environmental field. The anti-waste in-

68. Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

69. The 2014 protests in Maoming even led to solidarity protests in Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Shannon Tiezzi, “Maoming Protests Continue in Southern China,” *Diplomat*, April 5, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/04/maoming-protests-continue-in-southern-china>, accessed December 5, 2014.

70. Andrea Chen and Mimi Lau, “Chinese Activists Collect Signatures against Proposed Power Plant in Heyuan in Guangdong,” *South China Morning Post*, March 8, 2015.

cinerator campaigns in Beijing's Liulitun and Asuwei (2006–12) displayed close parallels with the one in Panyu in terms of local activists becoming policy advocates and cooperating with environmental NGOs.⁷¹ An environmental NGO steered farmers to successfully resist against a polluting factory in Anhui's Quigang village (2006–8).⁷² Environmental NGOs and veteran activists based in Beijing, Kunming, and other big cities accumulated knowledge and learned how to contact and collaborate with community leaders or potential pollution victims, especially through the prolonged campaigns against large dam building in southwest China since 2003.⁷³ Some of the environmental NGOs involved in the Nuijiang dam campaign, such as Green Watershed, also became the core players in the Kunming PX campaign.

Beyond the environmental domain but similar to the tree-saving campaign in Nanjing, pro-Cantonese-language protests in Guangzhou in 2010 were prompted by a proposal to extend Mandarin programming on local television. The protests were rooted in concerns over the value of the Cantonese language and *lingnan* (southern China) culture. People are now ready to take to the streets on public issues that touch upon their collective identity and symbolic heritage.⁷⁴ Drawing on “the art of collective behavior” (*jiti xingwei yishu*) to combine policy advocacy with collective street action, citizens carried banners, set up replica scenes, and played mini-drama in public space to condemn sexual violence and to support a pedicure worker who was on trial for killing a man who had sexually assaulted her in 2009, which was widely reported in news media. Women's rights groups have since innovatively combined high-level policy advocacy and flash-mob-style collective action on the street in multiple cities across the country.⁷⁵ Demonstrating that even an overtly political public good (media freedom) could spur street protests under specific circumstances, a large number of local residents laid farewell flowers in front of Google's Beijing headquarters when the company decided to stop obeying state censorship in 2011. Hundreds took to the streets in Guangzhou and many more voiced their support online in early 2013 to support journalists who were striking against censorship at *Southern Weekly*.⁷⁶ Moreover, a vibrant anti-GM food movement brings together a diverse coalition of actors, such as international

71. Johnson, “The Health Factor.”

72. Skye Gilbert, “Victory: A Grassroots NGO Empowers a ‘Cancer Village’ to Take Action,” *China Environment Forum*, 2009, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/victory-grassroots-ngo-empowers-cancer-village-to-take-action>, accessed August 5, 2015.

73. Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 110–49; Teets, *Civil Society*, 113–15.

74. Austin Ramzy, “Protesters Stand Firm on Cantonese Rights,” *Time Magazine*, August 2, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2008060,00.html>, accessed July 9, 2014.

75. Stephanie Bräuer, “Becoming Public: Tactical Innovation in the Beijing Anti-Domestic Violence Movement,” *VOLUNTAS* (June 2015), doi:10.1007/s11266-015-9610-2.

76. China Media Bulletin Special Feature, “The ‘Southern Weekly’ Controversy,” *Freedom House*, January 18, 2013, http://www.freedomhouse.org/cmb/2013_southern_weekly#.U7zaVrH54T0, accessed July 9, 2014.

NGO Greenpeace, social celebrities (e.g., famous TV anchor Cui Yongyuan), and nationalist Maoists, and merges sustained advocacy with small but regular demonstrations.⁷⁷

To varying degrees, innovations in terms of broader protest constituencies, sequence, and linkages between protests and advocacy have also been borrowed during conflicts over clear-cut economic interest. For example, in 2013 a coalition of township and village Party secretaries and commercial associations engaged in advocacy but at the same time orchestrated a demonstration with an estimated thousand participants. They succeeded in thwarting plans to integrate Zhejiang Province's prosperous Changxing county into neighboring Huzhou city as an urban district.⁷⁸ In 2015, residents in Linshui, Sichuan, acted fast upon learning that a new high-speed railway would bypass their county. They staged several days of large-scale demonstrations to demand a change in the plan, using slogans emphasizing the broad benefits the railway could bring to the whole county, not just the interests of the protesters.⁷⁹ In short, while the large majority of the several tens of thousands of protests in China every year still draw on the old repertoire, innovations pioneered in the environmental domain are becoming more common.

Three interrelated key dynamics that arguably paved the way for the emergence of the new type of protest are at play here and have come to the fore during the early 2000s. First, changes in the Chinese public sphere—the commercialization of the media and the development of the Internet and social media—have produced a stock of journalists and Internet opinion leaders who seek opportunities to shape public debate.⁸⁰ These actors possess the capacity to mold and mobilize latent collective identities. They also have the necessary skills to frame issues of public concern and not yet materialized threats into grievances that mobilize large numbers of people into action. Such figures have played an important role in all our cases and were particularly evident in Xiamen and Nanjing. In addition, the availability of policy information, partly due to new government regulations on information release, partly due to a faster flow and availability of information through the Internet, smart phones, and interactive

77. Jim Harkness, "The Politics of GMO in China," *Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy*, October 2011, <http://www.iatp.org/blog/201110/the-politics-of-gmo-in-china>, accessed July 9, 2014, and "Genetically Modified Crops: Food Fight," *Economist*, December 14, 2013.

78. We thank Liu Mingxing for bringing this case to our attention. "Zhejiang huzhou changxing xian qian ren juji kangyi che xian she qu guanfang xuanbu zanhuan" [Thousands gather in protest against the planned integration of Changxing County into Zhejiang's Huzhou City and the authorities announced a suspension of plans], *Guanchazhe Wang* [Observer net], May 10, 2013, http://m.guancha.cn/local/2013_05_09_143483, accessed July 9, 2014.

79. Siqi Cao, "Sichuan County Protests 'Unfair' Rail Links," *Global Times*, May 18, 2015.

80. Jonathan Hassid, "Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists," *China Quarterly*, no. 208 (2011): 813–32; Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei, "War of Position and Microblogging in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 80 (2013): 292–311.

communicative technologies, has proven critical for preventive resistance and provided sufficient time for policy advocates to enter the game.⁸¹

Second, while getting arrested in protests continues to be a real possibility, in practice the risk for average participants has substantially declined over the 2000s. Through new regulations, the central government has restrained local authorities' discretion in using repression, and the growing importance of the private sector means that the local state's capacity to coerce urban residents as government employees has been weakened.⁸² The central government also has augmented sympathy for protesters in its public communications, has allowed more protests to be reported in the news media, and has tolerated increasingly candid debates among intellectuals about major cases of unrest.⁸³ These changes have led to a decrease in public perceptions of risk related to protest. In our case studies, Xiamen people took to the streets only days before the hyper-sensitive Fourth of June, Nanjing residents mobilized although the state was in the midst of a repression campaign following the Arab Spring, and Kunming residents openly shared online their applications for demonstration permits. As the perceived cost of protest participation has decreased, more people are willing to mobilize in behalf of causes that do not exclusively benefit themselves, their families, and their close associates.

Third, over the past 20 years Chinese civil society has developed by leaps and bounds. The number of NGOs across issue areas has been rising, and the increase has been particularly pronounced in the field of environmental protection.⁸⁴ Environmental NGOs have emerged in all provinces, and they have cultivated nested networks for mutual support. These groups have accumulated the necessary knowledge and organizational resources to support grassroots campaigns and to translate protesters' demands into policy advocacy, as has been

81. Wu and Yang, "Web 2.0 and Political Engagement in China."

82. Xi Chen, *Social Protest*, 59-86; Yanhua Deng and Kevin O'Brien, "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters," *China Quarterly*, no. 215 (2013): 533-52; Kevin O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and "Harmonious Demolition," *The China Journal*, no. 74 (July 2015): 1-17; Peter L. Lorentzen, "Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8 (2013): 127-58; Yang Su and Xin He, "Street as Courtroom: State Accommodation of Labor Protest in South China," *Law and Society Review* 44, no. 1 (2010): 162-63.

83. H. Christoph Steinhardt, "From Blind Spot to Media Spotlight: Propaganda Policy, Media Activism, and the Emergence of Protest Events in the Chinese Public Sphere," *Asian Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (2015): 119-37, and "State Behavior and the Intensification of Intellectual Criticism in China"; Su and He, "Street as Courtroom."

84. Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Mertha, *China's Water Warriors*; Teets, *Civil Society*; Spires et al., "Societal Support"; Wu, "Environmental Activism"; Yang, "Environmental NGOs."

evident in the cases of Panyu and Kunming. Given the great expansion of environmental NGOs, it is not coincidental that street protests over environmental issues have been the first to intersect successfully with NGO-led policy advocacy.⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

From rejecting plans for polluting factories and bargaining over the siting of waste treatment facilities to advocating for better conservation of green heritage, Chinese citizens now proactively mobilize for a broad range of environmental concerns. This article has examined how a watershed event in the mid-2000s has ushered in a wave of large-scale environmental protests that have significantly diverted from the repertoire of popular contention that became dominant in the 1990s. This emerging repertoire has begun to appear in protests beyond the environmental arena. As William Gamson astutely observed, an enlargement of protest action to incorporate new actors and wider domains of conflict usually benefits the weaker side. Thus, the repertoire innovations imply a strengthening of social forces vis-à-vis the state.⁸⁶

As important as these changes are, three points of caution are necessary when thinking about their broader significance for Chinese politics. First, although Chinese protesters have shown that they can be substantially more public spirited than before, the public good of a city (e.g., clean air) becomes a private good of that locality when the polluting industry simply shifts elsewhere. This problem is a well-known feature of the NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard) phenomenon. Environmentalists in China are working to circumvent such a scenario by promoting pollution control as a general concern for the whole country that demands top-level change in policy making. Yet environmental protests in China have not entirely avoided this pitfall. An example is the relocation of the Xiamen PX project to the neighboring poorer city of Zhangzhou, where the worst fears of activists became true when the factory exploded in early 2015.

Second, this article has shown that the strategy of resisting government policies and large state-backed projects in the name of the public has taken root, but we do not claim that the new repertoire will soon replace other types of popular resistance or necessarily evolve into a unified mass movement. The authorities so far have managed to avert the emergence of a coherent macronarrative that weaves incidents and identities together on a national scale.

85. Certainly, direct cooperation between NGOs and protesters remains very sensitive. For instance, anti-PX protesters in Ningbo were reluctant to talk to leading environmental NGOs even weeks after the protests had passed and the local government had withdrawn the proposal.

86. William A. Gamson, "Bystanders, Public Opinion, and the Media," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 242.

Finally, in the three years since the new national leadership took office in late 2012, state pressure on the media, universities, and civil society has intensified. Prominent human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, and Internet commentators have been arrested, and women's rights activists, college students, and NGO staff now sometimes face harassment or detention. The Internet is increasingly censored, and a documentary on air pollution that went viral overnight was cleansed from the public sphere as soon as its mobilization potential became apparent. Nonetheless a pushback by the state does not imply that the new action strategies will be forsaken. Even if some repertoire innovations may become less prominent for the time being, they are likely to rebound once an opportunity presents itself.

With these caveats in mind, we conclude that the new repertoire of popular contention that has emerged in the environmental field and reaches beyond it poses a challenge to the Chinese state, because it links citizens from diverse backgrounds on behalf of broader causes and generates a high amount of publicity and social learning. As the environmental crisis in China shows no signs of abating, major public environmental grievances with pronounced potential for mobilization will remain on the table. The new protests in the name of the public may well stand at the forefront of broader changes in the landscape of Chinese sociopolitical activism and contentious politics.