

SOCIAL OMISSIONS ON CHINESE ENVIRONMENTAL NGO AGENDAS: KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION THAT SILENCES

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This anthropological study examines how middle-class domination on the Chinese NGO scene is reflected on environmental NGO (ENGO) agendas and in their interactions with rural residents. Investigating environmental education, recycling, conservation and advocacy, this study demonstrates that many ENGO-promoted environmental projects render farmers and migrant workers invisible as stakeholders and neglect economic costs to them. It finds that civil society development, which responds to urban middle-class concerns, borrows global models, and relies on certain technologies of knowledge production, contributes to the omission of rural interests on ENGO agendas. When ENGOs' green values are translated into projects to be implemented in the real world, environmental protection for the good of the planet can have social impacts that infringe on someone else's concrete interests. Simultaneously, ENGOs' green approaches naturalize and depoliticize the environmentally unsustainable lifestyles of the urban middle class. This study reassesses the common spatial metaphor of civil society based on the distance from the state and argues that civil society actors' distance from other actors in society is equally important. The beliefs that the environment can be protected by projects for future-oriented transformation and that rural areas can be managed from the urban centers bring ENGOs closer to the government and to global environmental standards than to local people. This study therefore questions how much the rise of the Chinese NGO scene can alleviate systemic social inequalities now and in the future for reasons that are internal to NGOs, rather than attributable to the Chinese political system.

Keywords: China, nongovernmental organizations, environmentalism, middle class, knowledge production

1. Introduction

One common assumption in China studies is that civil society will emerge with the middle class (Yu 2002; Tang and Zhan 2008; Bao 2009; Wang 2011). Another expects that civil society organizations represent the voice of society (Ma 2005; Spires 2011; Tai 2013; Lin 2018). These assumptions derive from certain macro-level explanations concerning transitions to democracy (Diamond, Lipset and Linz 1987; Huntington 1991; Lum 2000), which were popular when the civil society framework was adopted in China studies to explain why, despite popular mobilization, China failed to democratize with much of the Communist world (Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990; McCormick, Su, and Xiao 1992). Since then, these assumptions have been challenged. The Chinese middle class hardly forms a united and politically active social entity striving for the political change these predictions anticipated (Tsai 2007; Chen 2013; Chen and Goodman 2013; Alpermann 2016). Neither the Chinese middle class nor civil society position their voice as a societal counterforce to state power (Wright 2010; Tsang and Lee 2013; Lui and Liu 2013; Hildebrandt 2013; Teets 2014). This chapter agrees with the criticism but highlights another problem. It asks instead what kind of civil society is in the making if these assumptions are true.

Taking seriously the standard presumption of pluralistic and conflicting interests in political sciences, a celebration of middle-class social association causes concerns. Political ideas of class, inclusion, representation, interest groups, cleavages and marginalization all presuppose that interests do not always converge. From the perspective of diverging social interests, a social voice dominated by the middle class is a biased voice. Civil society is known to be an unequal space that reflects other social and political inequalities (Hegel [1820] 1967; Gramsci 1971). Unequal inclusion in the public sphere may condemn the un(der)represented to marginality (Fraser 1990). If the Chinese middle class leads the development of civil society, in a society that is comprised of conflicting social interests, social groups that do not belong to the middle class will be underrepresented in Chinese civil society.

Earlier research has investigated the separation of Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from the state (Spires 2011; Hildebrandt 2013; Teets 2014; Arantes, Zou, and Che 2020), but has paid little attention to their separation from other parts of society. This study seeks to launch a discussion about the social divisions caused by middle-class domination in NGOs. Social exclusion inside Chinese civil society has only been the central research question in one study. It shows that the students in the democracy movement of 1989 lost an opportunity for society-wide mobilization by excluding workers and farmers (Kelliher 1993). Anecdotally and empirically, Chinese NGOs' limited social reach is not new, but a systematic, class-centered and theoretical analysis is lacking.

To respond to this need, this study tracks and analyzes class-based omissions on NGO agendas. It highlights omissions relating to the wide and often institutionalized disparities China maintains between urban centers to be modernized first and rural areas that serve as resource bases for modernization elsewhere. It examines how environmental NGOs (ENGOS) relate to these inequalities and co-produce them. Although Chinese ENGOS contribute to greener policies, NGO programs are not automatically socially positive or neutral but can have socially negative outcomes. This study therefore investigates how Chinese NGO agendas reflect urban middle-class values and omit relevant rural concerns. It examines how and to what extent middle-class lifestyles, global models, and a reliance on certain technologies of knowledge production contribute to the omission of rural interests on ENGO agendas.

First, this study introduces the idea of omissions. It consequently discusses four common causes on Chinese ENGO agendas, environmental education, recycling, conservation, and advocacy, together with the mechanisms contributing to the omission of rural interests. The mechanisms of omission include agenda setting according to ENGO workers' own middle-class values and interests, influences from global NGO society, and knowledge production that makes it possible to conceptualize 'nature' as something that can be protected with NGO programs. Finally, this study critiques spatial metaphors that position NGOs in relation to the state but not in relation to other actors in society.

2. Methodology

This study is based on five anthropological fieldworks among Chinese NGOs, taking place altogether over 12 months between 2004 and 2017. I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 staff members in ten influential ENGOS, multiple times with some during these years. I engaged in participant observation in NGO meetings and during NGO-organized events and trips. Participant observation permitted me to listen to and chat with ordinary ENGO members, NGO allies, and people affected by ENGO programs. All of these ENGOS are of Chinese origin, but eight have received foreign money. None of them is a government-organized NGO. Their offices are located in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Kunming, and Nanjing. They therefore include ENGOS from metropolises and from provincial capitals where influential ENGOS had evolved already before 2004 when my fieldwork started. I also interviewed environmental student associations financed by ENGOS and NGOs that provide funding, training or legal assistance to ENGOS. A caveat emanating from the selection of the influential ENGOS is that their distance from rural interests may be more pronounced than in less prestigious ENGOS outside the national and provincial centers.

Participant observation was my main information gathering method during ENGO visits to rural areas. As a member of an NGO entourage, no neutral setting for interviews without an NGO presence could be arranged. Therefore, no farmers were interviewed. Participation permitted me, however, to observe farmers' verbal interactions with ENGOs and the omissions that happened in NGO work. Participant observation allowed me to identify omissions when something relevant the farmers had said was not communicated to the ENGO's agenda.

Methodologically, a specific strategy is needed to study omissions that largely remain unarticulated. Instead of counterarguments, my study attends to what was and was not on the agenda. The economic and welfare impacts that ENGO projects and activities bring can be observable and knowable even without verbal input. Omissions also became evident by observing interactions between ENGOs and farmers. In the field, ENGO workers sometimes focused on social media when they lost interest in what farmers were saying. Afterwards, when ENGO workers summarized fieldwork results, many farmers' inputs were missing.

To demonstrate that a middle-class bias is discernible throughout ENGO activities, it is not enough to study one case or even one ENGO-promoted issue. In a single issue, omissions could be either random or issue-specific. Despite overall neglect, the reasons for omissions may vary. Choosing different areas of NGO activity allows for an investigation of the various reasons contributing to the omissions. This study covers the most common environmental causes Chinese ENGOs engage in. Out of ten ENGOs, six are active in nature conservation and four in recycling. Seven provide environmental education and four are known for advocacy against industrial projects.

3. Researching silences

What is left out matters. Silences have profound implications for "how actions are produced, constructed, constrained, justified, made accountable, or naturalized" (Murray and Durrheim 2019, 14). Silences can reduce the scope of agency by suppressing the variation and complexity of experiences, meanings, and interests that are publicly expressed (Achino-Loeb 2006). Silences contribute to powerlessness as they normalize some options and discount other perspectives.

Silence speaks in sociology, political science, history, philosophy, postcolonial studies and anthropology. In all these research traditions, silence has been related to political power. Any consensus over social order becomes naturalized through what remains beyond discussion (Bourdieu 1991). Agenda setting that excludes some relevant perspectives from decision-making is a way to establish domination (Bachrach and Baratz 1963). Exclusions from the public sphere contribute to the neglect of the interests of the excluded (Fraser 1990). Marginalization

happens when some people's situations become illegible to the powerful (Das and Poole 2004). Established criteria for how evidence is collected, its significance is assessed, and narratives are constructed tend to silence incompatible facts and interpretations (Somers 1995; Trouillot 2015). Some people's views become unknowable because dominant language and analytical conventions leave no space for them to express themselves (Spivak 1985; Lyotard 1988). Due to different worldviews, people give essentially different meanings to objects, many of which are untranslatable to the language of decision-making (Cadena and Blaser 2018). I am inspired by Scott's (1998) idea that illegibility arises from simplification, standardization, and abstraction in knowledge production that makes local situations knowable to the state and experts. These varied approaches underline the point, shared by this study, that voicelessness is an inherent component in the reproduction of social and political domination. Therefore, opening new arenas, such as NGOs, for citizen participation and demand making may not be enough to make all concerns voiced and heard.

Omissions are present in NGO activities as well. Political scientists, anthropologists, and feminists have revealed various issues with NGO work that could be reframed as omissions. Skewed representation is possible, for example, with NGOs as "self-appointed representatives" (Montanaro 2012). As norm entrepreneurs, NGOs may promote norms that disregard other norms and other people's rights (Colonomos 2001; Catney and Doyle 2011). Sometimes the disregard of relevant concerns and injustices in NGO programs drive local people to resort to obstruction (Sundberg 1998; Li 2007). NGOization narrows social activism by dismissing some claims, including class-based claims to social justice (Spakowski 2011; Lang 2013). This study brings these observations together under a common conceptual umbrella of "omissions". Furthermore, it maintains that omissions position NGOs in relation to other social actors.

4. The middle class and NGOs

As long as civil society is equated mainly with autonomous associations, as it sometimes is (Ma 2006; Shieh and Deng 2011; Sima 2011; Chan 2012), the middle class predominates in this sphere in China. NGO leaders generally come from academic, administrative, managerial or business backgrounds (Hildebrandt 2013). Typically, ENGO membership consists of intellectuals, students and media professionals (Sun and Zhao 2007; Xie 2009). Their Internet audiences are well-educated (Sima 2011, 492; Zhang and Shaw 2015). The NGO events I observed appealed to students, journalists, researchers, sympathetic bureaucrats, teachers and lawyers. Businesses commissioned ENGOs to arrange specific environmental events for their office staff. One reason for the middle-class dominance is NGOs' location in

a transnational system in which foreign donors, international NGO forums and transnational flows of ideas expect language and accounting skills.

Research literature demonstrates, implicitly or explicitly, that Chinese NGOs are not always integrated well with the social groups they work with. Many NGOs that speak for marginalized social groups rely on elites who channel their demands and offer them paternalistic guidance (Howell 2004, 151–154, 159–161; Froissart 2009). When NGOs help the poor, their connections to the lower classes are often mediated through state institutions, such as local governments or schools (Jacka 2010; Salmenkari 2014). Many prioritize political connections or financial accountability to donors over their clients or over the people exposed to environmental hazards (Lu 2009, 117–119; Yang 2010, 114–116). Tensions occur between the target group's economic needs and volunteers' or donors' idealistic expectations of moral rewards (Zhou and Shang 2011; Wang 2010). NGOs are sometimes met with suspicions by those they seek to help (Franceschini 2014; Alpermann and Bondes 2019, 258, 260). Literature reveals that middle-class management, target setting, and resource allotment styles may diverge from local realities or lower-class life experiences (Tsang and Lee 2013; Zhou 2017). Consequently, some urban-elite-led projects fail (Dong 2011). The most disturbing cases expose aid recipients to a tourist gaze (Qian 2014).

Chinese ENGO staff members clearly display common middle-class attributes, such as urban residence, university education and white-collar jobs. This study shows that their middle-class lifestyles shape their considerations, expectations and values. This study does not claim, however, that there is a united middle-class interest, discourse or identity. Quite the contrary, among the middle class, consumerist values are more prevalent than environmental urges (Eberhardt 2015). Within the urban middle class, ENGOs expand the public agenda by introducing new alternatives to it. Nevertheless, as this study shows, middle-class consumerism permeates ENGO agendas in a way farmers' values do not. When ENGOs promote ecological travel, green technology and organic diets, they expect environmentalists to be consumers, while considerations for the farmers' purchasing power or the migrants' work in the informal economy are absent from their agendas. Thus, omissions from NGO agendas may contribute to an underrepresentation of other social voices within organized civil society.

5. Omissions by NGOs

During my fieldwork with Chinese NGOs, I first became aware of omissions as a homogeneous social composition of NGO personnel who framed issues from the urban-middle-class perspectives. I witnessed paternalizing expert talk about marginalized social groups without their presence. I realized how NGOs reproduce

a work culture that is typical for academic and white-collar office jobs. NGOs produce reports, meetings, presentations and press releases. Their work style facilitates cooperation with the government, which likewise relies on documents and meetings, but is alienating to those who are not interested or confident in documentation and public presentation.

Chinese NGOs are mostly involved in issues and solutions that suit middle-class preferences, values and lifestyles. The ENGOS I studied took for granted that people have purchasing power and leisure. One, for example, focused on green technology and ecological outing culture, which are relevant to those who can afford to live in eco-housing and travel. In contrast, research (Yang 2010; Tsang and Lee 2013) finds that environmental health hazards affecting the poor in rural areas receive inadequate attention from ENGOS. In my fieldwork, pollution was a concern for many ENGOS, but their urban location and responsibilities limited efforts to reduce pollution to mostly occasional one-day inspections of close-by areas. For improvements, they had to rely on urban authorities and courts and on technological cooperation with city-based businesses.

I observed how ENGOS talked about education, consumption and leisure in nature outside the cities they lived in. Absent from their talk and agendas were the issues social scientists associate with non-urban China, such as second-class career opportunities and social services for rural residents, access to farmland, and informal job markets for rural migrants in cities. ENGO activists' indifference to rural views goes beyond a mere selection of issues. In two instances, I witnessed how ENGO workers, who found it easier to communicate with them than with farmers, established cooperation with the enterprise or the government that acted against farmers' interests. I occasionally observed mutual distrust between ENGOS and villagers.

Chinese NGO volunteers are sometimes aware of inequality, although they do not phrase it in a class-sensitive vocabulary. In 2013, students volunteering for educational NGOs publicly discussed what their short stay as teachers in poverty-stricken ethnic villages, although rewarding for them personally, meant for the children they left behind to continue inadequate schooling with new unfulfilled aspirations (charity event, June 2013). However, I witnessed no talk about social inequalities among Chinese environmentalists. Instead, I sometimes witnessed naive or discriminatory readings of rural realities colored through urban middle-class experiences, both of which signaled that rural residents do not belong to urban centers.

The social asymmetry of voices did not actualize as conflicts in which all parties articulate their interests as they do in the models of class struggle or pluralist interest representation. I did not detect verbalized confrontations between two stakeholders, but the absence of one voice. NGOs did not at times recognize rural

residents as stakeholders. When they did, they collected rural residents' views for their own purposes and neglected other rural voices and needs. Omissions, rather than social conflicts, were evident throughout my field research. Consequently, this study highlights often class-based omissions of social concerns on ENGO agendas and activities.

The absence of counterarguments does not mean that villagers did not express their discontent with NGO approaches. Although I never witnessed a counter-position to an ENGO agenda, rural residents frequently pointed out its irrelevance for them. They talked about other issues instead. Once a local lawyer even suggested that the ENGO should work on a more relevant local case instead. On various occasions, farmers questioned whether ENGOs are useful for solving their problems. "What can you do about it?" they asked. At times, forceful silences hinted that an ENGO approach could make participating farmers vulnerable to pressures from local powers.

Omissions do not equal silence. Rural views were voiced and understood, but they were not taken into account on NGO agendas. One factor making rural opinions dismissible was their plurality. Diverse, partial and sometimes contradictory rural voices were easy to dismiss. NGOs articulated environmentalism in a type of vocabulary that was communicable to other NGOs and to the government. Rural residents were not heard because they did not take a strong stance for or against NGOs programs. Even when rural residents showed little confidence in ENGOs' problem-solving capacities, they nevertheless sympathized with NGO efforts to tackle problems. Noncommunication impedes the identification and formulation of common discontents with NGO proposals, especially if the proposals seemed authoritative, abstract, or detached from daily experiences. In the absence of conceptualization, grievances may take non-verbal forms of expression instead (Pun 2005; Yeh 2009).

These observations explain why I chose the term 'omissions', instead of 'silences', to describe the paucity of rural interests on Chinese ENGO agendas. The term 'omissions' emphasizes the one-sided and active, albeit often not conscious, process of knowledge production. Omissions are produced by the subject, instead of being a quality of an object remaining silent. If ENGOs had chosen to listen, rural residents could have been heard.

6. Invisibility

I begin the introduction to how omissions are manifested in ENGO work practice with my field observations during a Shanghai NGO conference on environmental education. The NGO conference organized an excursion to an organic farm. During the excursion, participants took a stroll around the village next to the organic farm.

When we come to an orchard with blossoming peach trees, a teacher opens the gate to the orchard and lets the children in. "Anyone who has never climbed a tree can do it now!" she prompts them. In this cold spring, peach trees are blooming already but I see no bees around. It struck me that the farmer is going to suffer an economic loss this year. The loss of flowers caused by children climbing blossoming trees would be a small addition to his problems, but he would not have seen the fruit trees which bring him income as playthings for children to reconnect with nature. (Field notes, March 2013)

This field observation concretely demonstrates that there can be two justifiable ways of seeing the same trees either as livelihood or as nature. The teacher in the ENGO network who sees trees through the logic of environmental education fails to see them through the farmer's frame of production and economic value. The teacher's framing places all trees in nature, but for the farmer, his orchard is not natural but a result of his own work. For each frame, something is framed out. The urban teacher's pedagogical idea to allot a specific time and place for leisure excursions to nature arises from everyday distance from nature. She can therefore dismiss what at other times occurs at the site, including the material interests involved in its use. This everyday example highlights some of the issues with NGO work this study explores: omissions, selectivity and classifications.

Similar issues were evident throughout the ENGO excursion to the organic farm. The environmentalists envisioned an idealized and abstracted countryside which represents nature, greenery and country living. For them, greenery was for middle-class consumption. They celebrated environmental protection for recreation and natural food for health. They viewed greenery through personal aesthetic, environmental and maternal values. The environmentalists were urbanites who were insulated from the structural class-based inequalities between rural and urban areas in China, such as rural exclusion from urban schooling, jobs and social security provisions. They politicize healthy organic food for urban residents like themselves and their children (Si, Schumilas, and Scott 2015; Leggett 2020), not the most pressing issues in the countryside, such as policy-based discrimination limiting rural residents' free movement and educational opportunities or low market prices for food, both of which make farmers lag economically behind the urbanites.

Due to their middle-class perspectives, ENGOs fail to politicize many environmentally destructive processes. Although urban growth in China flattens and uproots huge areas of green or agricultural land (Sargeson 2013), the Chinese NGO activists I challenged during my fieldwork saw no problem with urban sprawl. When the destruction of vegetation and fauna is producing the urban middle-class lifestyle, it remains invisible and unproblematized on NGO agendas.

If middle-class consumption is politicized, ENGOs persuade consumers to choose greener alternatives. The solutions offered to the urban middle class are voluntary, while to the farmers NGO-promoted transformations may be forced.

These field observations demonstrate the need to ask *for whom* environmental acts are beneficial. ENGOs' focus on middle-class concerns can make them blind to the relevant concerns of other social groups. The public interest the environmentalists defend depends on values and priorities that are neither socially neutral nor universally held. Environmental frames can hide interest conflicts in which farmers and other less powerful groups may lose out. When environmentalists make claims, someone else may end up paying the costs. Hence, it matters who defines the norms and priorities in NGO work.

When ethical values are translated into acts that are implemented in the real world, environmental protection for the good of the planet can have social impacts that infringe on some concrete interests. Blindness to producers' economic interests can make room for other economic calculations in the interest of other beneficiaries. Chinese farmers are sometimes evicted to construct non-natural eco-cities for green consumption (Caprotti 2014; Sze 2015). When farmers protested a land grab by a green technology company intending to build an eco-city, one ENGO staff member proposed that his ENGO should mediate the conflict (personal communication, August 2013). The company had provided meeting spaces and product introductions for his ENGO to promote green technology, which can mitigate greenhouse gas emissions on a global scale (personal observation, June 2013). The ENGO staff member, however, ignored the fact that interest conflicts over scarce resources, such as land, can impose global environmental costs locally on specific farmers. When ENGOs promote intervention in existing social practices or dispossession of scarce resources such as land, it matters if the people whose lives are being transformed are underrepresented in civil society."

7. Aligning with centralization, not social autonomy

Chinese ENGOs advocate transnational waste recycling models, which rely on large-scale bureaucratic and industrial infrastructures. Centralized solutions to environmental problems require planning and management from a distance. Hence, ENGO efforts to do what is good for the environment tend to advance public control over waste management. Since they promote the collection, transportation, and processing of waste on a large scale, ENGOs need city governments to design and run large-scale infrastructures. Along with providing technical expertise for planning, ENGOs raise public awareness about how to use the centralized infrastructure for recycling (Arantes, Zou, and Che 2020). ENGOs also rely on the state because recycling can be of public interest even when economic incentives are

not there. With the help of public investment, Chinese NGOs plan loss-making recycling processes for certain materials (presentation of a project, June 2017).

ENGOS see urban centers as something to be modernized and civilized by the introduction of novel recycling systems, which rely on individual voluntarism by enlightened urban residents. Their idea of recycling suits the common depiction of civil society as a sphere for individualistic voluntary activity (Seligman 1992). ENGOS cultivate voluntary environmental responsibility by atomized individuals. They target people who should recycle, but do not. NGO education fosters individual freedom for those who know how to conduct themselves (Rose 1999).

The compartmentalization of waste production, disposal, and waste treatment leads to compartmentalized responses to waste management. ENGOS' narrative separates waste production from waste disposal. It thereby blurs the role of middle-class consumption patterns in the product cycle as long as people fulfill their individual duty to dispose of waste correctly after use. ENGOS campaign against plastic bags, but not against their content. They urge those who buy too much food to reduce food waste by reprocessing products and finding alternative uses. The recycling narrative thus depoliticizes the environmentally unsustainable lifestyle of the urban middle class.

The ENGO-promoted recycling model does not take into account the people who already recycle waste. In China, an alternative model still coexists with the official recycling infrastructures promoted by ENGOS and city governments. It is largely invisible to planners because it defies centralized planning and data collection. It relies on informal work by unregistered migrants (Linzner and Salhofer 2014). Although informal recycling is not recognized or supported by official institutions, recyclers are socially institutionalized. Informal homeplace-based networks support migrants in business (Ma and Xiang 1998). In housing complexes, informal recyclers make regular calls. Housing complexes may even hire migrant waste collectors to fulfill recycling regulations (Landsberger 2019, 101–103).

The workplace housing complex where I lived in 2013 provides an example of how informal waste management works. The housing complex had arranged two waste collection points. In 2013, it had no recycling bins, but residents still recycled. They placed items they thought could be recyclable next to the collection points for the recyclers who circulated the area on their tricycles and collected sellable waste. Each recycler specialized in a certain type of waste. One collected paper and cardboard, another recycled electronic waste. Many were regulars whom the residents met at certain times by the main gate or when recyclers announced their presence with distinctive calls. Some recyclers even handed out business cards, showing how socially established their informal businesses were. Two separate, isolated systems of waste management worked well together. The informal economy formed a parallel system in which the formal system was not

interested in interfering. The residents used them both, depending on the nature of the waste. Food waste was thrown into the rubbish bins, glass was placed beside them for informal recyclers to pick up, and paper was fetched from home by a regular collector.

When I contrasted this successful experience with recycling according to the city-planned system, an ENGO activist confessed that the official system was too complicated to motivate recycling. She had problems explaining even to her own child why recycling is worthwhile. The main obstacle ENGOs work to overcome is the lack of knowledge by individuals who are left to sort out their own waste. ENGOs raise environmental awareness and appeal to personal responsibility and civic duty to overcome the lack of knowledge and motivation. NGO education produces good citizens who voluntarily follow the government's plan because ENGOs can do little else to fill the gaps in the waste collection system.

Residents who recycle through the informal economy can count on the recyclers' professional knowledge. To recyclers who collect waste to make a living, waste is a commodity without specific ecological connotations. People who dispose of waste have various motivations (Steuer and Salhofer 2018). Informal recycling does not require their personal participation. Many residents in my housing complex willingly separated recyclable items from disposable waste because of environmental concerns or because recycling was a social process based on social ties. They recycled because it was useful to someone in the community. In addition, informal recycling is a service. Regular collectors not only showed up at regular hours on their standard spot, but also picked up recyclables from residents' homes. Some even shared their profit with the household.

The informal recycling system is efficient (Chi et al. 2011), but I know of no Chinese NGO plan that seeks to learn from the informal waste collection or consults collectors to mitigate the economic effects the officially promoted industrial-scale waste collection has on livelihoods. One reason for its invisibility is ENGOs' reliance on models from countries where recycling was reintroduced after centralized systems had wiped out informal recycling. Another is that the informal economy defies planning and education to which NGOs can contribute. Informal recycling is too decentralized, too socially organized, and requires too practical, localized skills to form a plannable system. For planners, informal work and the social processes that support it appear so chaotic that they seem to require state control. Finally, NGO activists are complicit with the official Chinese population categories. They ignore informal recycling because it is done by rural people who officially should not be in the city. The poor are seen as a threat to safety and hygiene in the city like farmers are seen as the cause of the degradation of nature (Lei 2003; Zackey 2006). Classified as less civilized and economically backward, farmers and informal recyclers are removed from the ideal environment.

NGO-promoted recycling efforts are not immune to these common middle-class biases.

Civil society and the informal economy share many characteristics as spheres of self-organization and autonomy from the state (Abzug 1999). Comparing NGO-promoted recycling with informal recyclers, NGOs are closer to formal administrative processes and centralized knowledge production, which the state uses for planning and control. The informal economy and unauthorized migration are organized according to decentralized, autonomous activities and social ties that defy and subvert centralization. When NGOs support centralized systems that squeeze out the informal economy, they help the state constrain autonomous social activities.

8. Allocating spaces to nature

The construction of the middle class and of a middle-class-led civil society is closely related to expertise. Nature conservation is another field that utilizes environmental expertise to change physical and social landscapes. During my fieldwork, an ENGO organized a trip to a conservation reserve, which was founded after another Shanghai ENGO had advocated for it and after the city government had consulted the ENGO during the planning process (Yi 2017). My fieldwork diary points out that the reserve produced social transformation.

Before the gatekeeper lets us enter, we wait some time at the gate of the conservation reserve because the organizers of our excursion have to make some phone calls to let the gatekeeper know that our visit has been arranged with the management. Here nature is fenced to prevent the improper use of space. The wetlands and the forest were probably never cultivated fields, but local farmers must have used this land in other ways. Now they have no access to it. However, this area is designed for other people's access. This is not wilderness, but a constructed and managed landscape. A long wooden path and a bird-watching station are constructed for visitors, probably to protect nature outside of the path but also to facilitate movement without having to wet one's feet [...]. Workers are weeding plants by the path. Their clothes reveal that the workers are rural folk, perhaps local farmers now in paid labor. If they are locals, conservation has created for them a new indirect relationship with this land. Abstract monetary payments serve to distance them from control over the land. [...] We came to observe wild animals, and we saw them in the forest. (Field notes, March 2013)

Conservation preserves nature according to a specific image of what nature should look like. Environmental protection determines which animals and landscapes are worth protecting, for whose use they are protected, what is being actively

eradicated from this type of nature, and what kind of human presence is allowed (Nustad 2011). It was visibly evident that this reserve was an 'NGO landscape' (Sundberg 1998), produced according to conservation goals. The Shanghai reserve was designed to be nature according to bird watchers. The local chapter of the World Wildlife Fund initiated its conservation, but bird watchers' societies, locally active advocates for nature reserves (Ma et al. 2013), had shaped the understanding of what wetland and forest preservation is for and how nature is being represented and visited. Why should bird watchers be stakeholders in determining the use of this piece of land? Why were the numbers of animal species or particles in water accepted as decisive measures for success (Wu et al. 2011), but the farmers' income was not among the numeral targets?

Environmental conservation in China inclines towards protecting scenic areas that attract middle-class tourism (Zhou and Grumbine 2011; Xu, Sun and Liu 2014). In this Shanghai landscape, farmers' presence has been replaced with middle-class education, recreation and consumption. I was struck by how easily middle-class leisure is perceived to be part of environmental preservation, while farmers and agricultural production are defined out of the picture. According to some proposals, Shanghai country park planning should combine environmental objectives, leisure opportunities and employment for the locals (Xu, and Xue 2008). Thus, locals work to facilitate other people's leisure. This reflects the Chinese governmental strategy to use conservation programs to promote modernization and integrate farmers into the market economy (Harwood 2013). Chinese ecological visions, which emphasize restoration, technological solutions and 'civilized' uses, marginalize farmers' experiences and contributions (Sze 2015). In Shanghai, the conservation reserve took over the land the farmers had used for fisheries (Guo et al. 2010). Thus, the project excluded the farmers from a source of substantial income, which manual wage labor in park maintenance cannot compensate for. The ENGOs utilized a participatory approach and cooperated with villagers to initiate alternative sources of income and agricultural practices that reduce water pollution (Yi 2017). The goals of improving water quality and biodiversity by excluding farmers from certain places and livelihoods was not, however, on the participatory agenda.

Conservation has social impacts that can violate local interests, disrupt livelihoods and cause local discontent (Sundberg 1998; Li 2007). It alters power relations, creates exclusions and accesses, changes how livelihoods are generated, and generates unequally distributed costs and benefits (West, Igoe and Brockington 2006). Tensions between environmental and social benefits are common in China (Zhang et al. 2017). Attempts to satisfy them both often fail. Programs frequently fall short of either sustaining local incomes or stopping environmental degradation (Melick, Yang, and Xu 2007; Zhou and Grumbine 2011; Robbins and Harrell

2014). While conservation reduces local access to resources, it increases resources available to ENGOs. Foreign funding, or business funding in this Shanghai case (An and Wang 2014, v), becomes available to ENGO projects for conservation.

The ENGOs' public-interest approach implies that elite experts have a right to intervene from outside because they allegedly know better than the locals what is good for nature. This perception blames local residents for environmental degradation and defines farmers as "out-of-place" in forests and fields (Zackey 2006; Sturgeon 2009). In Shanghai, ENGOs and researchers deemed fisheries and agriculture harmful to water quality, but recommended heavy human interventions, which were defined as landscape restoration (An and Wang 2014). Paradoxically, until then agriculture and fishing had maintained the area in a sufficiently natural condition for conservation. Nature conserves protect environments that are less radically transformed by human activity than those urban centers which give rise to the modern middle class and to Chinese ENGOs. Conservation thus constrains the activities of others who are economically disadvantaged (Robbins and Harrell 2014). Typically, people assigned to produce ecosystem services for economically developed areas are characterized by their distance from power (Yeh 2009; Abram and Lien 2011).

NGOs' urban-led planning for marginalized regions generates additional territorialized social invisibilities. As one of my NGO interviewees noted (June 2017), when NGOs' focus either on metropolitan areas or on poverty-stricken areas, much of China in between remains invisible to NGOs. She was concerned about social programs, but her observation is equally true with NGO-promoted environmentalism.

In cities, Chinese ENGOs organize events and meetings inside parks. Parks and conservation reserves alike result from planning how greenery is accessed, displayed and zoned into specific places. As places for recreation and consumption, parks drive up property prices. Hence, greenery serves gentrification and the production of middle-class cities. The production of the middle class in China is linked with the idea of greening (绿化 *lǜhua*). For Chinese ENGOs, parks suffice for nature. In Chinese discourse, greening is not clearly distinguished from environmental protection (环保 *huanbao*). This accords with Chinese traditions, whether Daoist cosmology, *fengshui* (风水) design, or landscape gardening and painting, which see that the same cosmological forces shape both humans and nature. In contrast, Euro-American conservationism is often characterized by the dichotomous separation of humans from nature (Nustad 2011; West, Igoe, and Brockington 2006). Chinese planners and environmentalists have adopted, however, the idea of zoning nature and greenery into specific spaces from Euro-American conservationists and city planners, instead of developing local models.

9. Planning with generalizations

With the conservation reserve in Shanghai, the ENGOs advocated environmental protection that separates nature from the rest to make nature talkable, plannable and quantifiable. The idea of protecting nature within particular enclosed areas becomes meaningful with a specific type of knowledge production that makes nature quantifiable and space manageable from a distance. Scott (1998) demonstrates how the centralization of information and power relies on standardized knowledge that dismisses and misrepresents diversity, practical knowledge, temporal alteration and complex motivations in local communities. In homogeneous abstract spaces, real spatial relations are reduced to a planned spatial order that obscures social order with real exclusions and beneficiaries (Lefebvre 1991).

Standardization examines local multipurpose places through simplified factors that make space calculable and plannable (Scott 1998). Zoning nature to some spaces and economic activity to others expects that spaces can be characterized by a single purpose. For farmers, places are multifunctional, not technical and static two-dimensional zones. Their surroundings are places for residence, livelihood and socializing. Family roots, past work, identities, skills, memories, friendships and attachments become erased in the simplified calculus. For planners, one plot of land can be similar to another, but for those who live on it, this place has unique qualities that cannot be found anywhere else.

Environmentalism presumes that global nature can be protected through situated local projects (Latour 2004). Both governments and NGOs use generalizing expert knowledge to promote future-oriented projects to improve selected technical qualities locally (Li 2007; Yeh 2009). With the conservation reserve in Shanghai, NGOs acted as outside experts whose transformative plans, when implemented by the state, reduced local autonomy and promoted forceful changes to local lives. Instead of bottom-up demand making, NGO plans can be top-down "interventions" (Bebbington 2004). When experts from urban centers make plans for rural areas, they practice governance from a distance. Their ideas of nature are formed in the centers for peripheral places that appear more natural due to their distance from power (Abram and Lien 2011).

Generalizing knowledge makes illegible, even invisible, the plurality of local practices, needs and considerations (Scott 1998). In contrast, Chinese farmers are bilingual, although not always fluent, both in local practice and in the developmental discourse. "Differend" (Lyotard 1988) between generalizing knowledge and everyday practice means that farmers are unable to express many considerations within the dominant discourse. Thus, generalizing knowledge produces powerlessness. Due to its hegemonic position, seeming rationality, and promises for development, generalized knowledge may be persuasive even to farmers who lose out (Sturgeon 2009; Harwood 2013). Left voiceless, the discontented may resort

to non-verbal resistance, such as non-implementation, illegal resource appropriation or sabotage (Yeh 2009). *If illegibility and consequent impenetrability to state power count as communal autonomy and even resistance, as some scholars maintain (Shue 1988; Zweig 1989), Chinese NGOs programs that make localities more legible to the government are not necessarily empowering and democratizing. Conservation schemes increase state control (Sundberg 1998), even if they are promoted by NGOs.*

Chinese ENGOs specialize in knowledge production that gives them political power as experts but distances them from everyday concerns. Chinese NGO advocacy relies on NGOs' role as experts (Salmenkari 2008; Farid 2014). As experts, ENGOs propagate Western conservation models and global environmental concerns, not information generated out of Chinese farmers' or professional recyclers' concerns. They have adopted a generalizing, often idealistic, environmental discourse that is shareable across the globe because it is abstracted away from specific local realities. Chinese ENGOs' focus on information and education is natural for organizations run by intellectuals. The chosen focus also helps to avoid controversial activities in the restricted political environment.

NGOs' middle-class background increases the likelihood that they speak the language of generalization, abstraction and universalization, which distances them from localized everyday experiences. The middle class is expected to contribute to civil society because it is educated and has contacts with the outside world (Huntington 1991, 69, 106). A university education trained NGO activists to think with generalizations and abstractions and design plans and projects which promote piecemeal technical solutions to general problems. Transnational NGO collaboration, foreign-language campaign materials, and foreign funding introduce foreign ideas of environmentalism. Transnational environmentalism with its scientific, technological and moral approach is criticized for its disregard for social needs, localized practices and dissenting considerations (Taylor and Buttel 1992; Latour 2004). Generalizing transnational influence is obvious with all the environmental issues in this chapter: conservation reserves, recycling, environmental education, and advocacy.

10. Participatory schemes

How to reconcile NGOs' involvement in top-down knowledge production with the expectation that NGOs facilitate social participation? Top-down knowledge production can coexist with participatory approaches, such as field trips and consultations that include horizontal communication and even bottom-up feedback. Hearing local concerns does not, however, guarantee that they are received. During a field trip with an ENGO to study environmental and land rights issues in

2013, we found a confusing situation where, despite the victims' legitimate claims, we also heard self-aggrandizement, misunderstandings and even an unreliable witness among the farmers. I witnessed an ENGO activist's frustration to understand local dialect and constant misreading of local power relations. She sometimes missed evident cues about which company owned the land, who among the people we met belonged to the village government, and what could cause refusals to speak openly.

After collecting rural voices, NGOs struggle to translate local complexity into programs and practicable demands. An NGO collected local views during field trips, some of which I participated in, but it could do little to respond to the needs. Talking with locals, it promised to relay the findings to the local government. In the final exhibition reporting the findings, it filtered complex information according to its own priorities. The local government dismissed its findings, but the NGO could use them in its own education program. Local participants saw few improvements, although they were happy to see their contributions included in the exhibition.

Local participation in participatory schemes does not guarantee that NGO priorities will not prevail over local preferences. ENGOs tend to dominate the choice of priorities and preferred outcomes. They enter rural areas because individual elements in a complex local reality fit NGOs' own ethos. The tension between generalized knowledge and local plurality makes NGOs filter out some relevant local concerns. For example, an NGO field trip I participated in responded to a case made public by a local lawyer defending farmers' land rights and livelihood demands, but the ENGO rather focused on environmental concerns.

NGOs conceptualize problems using generalizing terminology, such as "the environment, biodiversity, ecology, pollution, water quality and desertification". Generalized terms circulate in transnational NGO circles but may be illegible to locals (Hathaway 2010). Even when NGOs try to accommodate local views, the mismatch between NGO plans and local needs sometimes imposes ideas of the environment that are alien to local culture or cause tensions within local communities (Coggins and Hutchinson 2006; Melick, Yang and Xu 2007). NGO projects tend to filter out what cannot be rendered technical and paired with corresponding interventions (Li 2007). Often Chinese ENGOs match standard problems with responses they have learned from transnational environmentalism.

Specialization makes NGOs' generalized expertise useful, however, in many situations. Generalized and simplified knowledge can be empowering and bring wider support for the cause. Submission to NGO priorities may benefit locals if they lack an understanding of the plans that will change their environment. In one ethnic minority village, which was threatened by a hydropower project and visited by an ENGO (interview, December 2005), only one eight-year-old schoolgirl was able to read the Chinese language the officials used to inform the residents.

Naturally, she was not old enough to understand the relevant technical and social aspects of dam building. Generalizations facilitate communication with administrators and national media audiences. By inviting publicity and by building advocacy networks beyond the locality, NGOs can increase opportunities for local environmental resistance to succeed (Mertha 2008; Johnson, Lora-Wainwright, and Lu 2018).

Generalized knowledge does not back up only one plan, but multiple plans based on different selected variables. Development programs are partitioned into circumscribed, sometimes even contradictory, plans, all based on simplified readings of reality. NGOs can mobilize alternative generalized knowledge against *other* plans in order to protect local people from forcible developments. They can introduce alternative schemes, which consider different information and let other people be heard (e.g., Mertha 2008; Alpermann and Bondes 2019). The ENGOs interviewed for this study used alternative generalizing knowledge to campaign against polluters, dams and corporate plantations. Although NGOs' relations with locals are shaped by hierarchical knowledge production, NGO-produced generalized knowledge can reposition farmers at more advantageous locations in power structures.

The successful campaign against the Nujiang River dams demonstrates how generalized knowledge works in NGO advocacy in China. One ENGO (interview, December 2005), leading the Nujiang anti-dam campaign, chose to assist farmers due to its prior work with water issues. The ENGO spread its message nationally through the media from the capital, but rarely had time to visit Nujiang. The ENGO coalition was genuinely attentive to local participation, livelihoods and minority cultures. Its local NGO partner did its best to overcome information and language barriers to make villagers understand the effects of hydropower plans. In advocacy, the ENGO coalition appealed to environmental values, minority cultures, heritage preservation and earthquake prevention against the arguments concerning energy needs and development in poor areas articulated by the industry and the provincial government (Mertha 2008, 130–147). By highlighting minority cultures and lifestyles, together with environmental threats, the ENGOs questioned the mega-size modernization project with a message that appealed to urban supporters and their middle-class touristic gaze. The ENGOs' capacity to organize participatory opportunities was so limited, however, that local views remained too scattered and uninformed to form a politically meaningful voice (Li, Liu, and Li 2012). Successful social pressure thus relied more on the national mobilization of middle-class media audiences than on the representation of local communities or on the mobilization of local resistance.

11. Findings

Theoretically, the proliferation of Chinese NGOs promised to expand social inclusion in a public agenda setting. Empirically, Chinese ENGOs indeed contribute to the social diversification of demands on the government. New environmentalist NGO voices challenge some growth-oriented economic policies and promote responsible consumerism in China. They foster social space for civic participation and voice citizens' concerns in public. With their specialist voice, rather than with a collective voice the Chinese government would repress, NGOs have gained a place in Chinese publicity as promoters of technical solutions to social and environmental needs. Although not living up to the optimistic predictions of democratization as systemic change and electoral reform, NGOs have contributed to the expansion of the public agenda and participatory channels. Although NGOs have not made the Chinese government more accountable, they have made it more responsive to public demands. This nuanced view accepts that the Chinese middle class largely collaborates with the Chinese state (Wright 2010) but does not see middle-class-run NGOs as agents of the status quo.

This study questions, however, how much Chinese NGOs can alleviate systemic social inequalities now and in the future. In the Chinese authoritarian context, certain issues are banned. ENGOs informed me about the silencing of campaigns against influential state industries and about the non-existence of an anti-nuclear-power stance in Chinese publicity as if it would be an off-limit topic. There are, however, some reasons to question whether NGOs will bring systemic changes to China are internal to NGOs, rather than attributable to the Chinese political system.

This study has identified omissions of many rural voices and concerns on ENGO agendas as obstacles to redressing systemic inequalities. Social omissions on ENGO agendas contribute to the normalization, and hence prolongation, of systemic social inequalities between rural and urban residents. This study tracked omissions of many kinds and degrees, but common to all of them was a hierarchical relationship that excludes rural residents from deciding what in the rural environment should be problematized and politicized.

Omissions take many forms according to the relevant literature. They occur when some people and their social experiences are not seen as worthy of inclusion in public debates (Fraser 1990); when information that does not conform with customary narratives, priorities and imaginations is not collected and processed (Trouillot 2015); when diverse, locally relevant information is simplified and generalized to make centralized planning possible (Scott 1998); or when some experiences cannot be expressed within the dominant phraseology (Lyotard 1988). These different types of omissions are all evident in Chinese ENGO work. In certain cases, introduced in this study, ENGOs normalized the middle-class experience

or collected only evidence that supports their own interpretation of the situation, while in others, they advocated generalizing plans from a distance and utilized expert language that accommodates only some interpretations of the situation.

The reasons for the omission of rural viewpoints are not similar throughout the issues Chinese ENGOs promote. With environmental education and green consumption, omissions reflected the naturalization of middle-class imaginations shaped by their well-to-do lifestyles and values. In recycling, conservation and environmental education, ENGOs disregarded some information to make local situations fit in a general model adopted from global NGO society. With conservation and recycling, omissions of alternative knowledge resulted from inclinations towards plan-like solutions. This study discovered different degrees of exclusion, ranging from total invisibility to voicelessness only in some parts of the process. All types of omissions worked to silence, however, rural interests concerning social inequalities and agricultural production. All worked to naturalize middle-class viewpoints.

Various reasons and degrees of omission indicate that social omissions have multiple roots. A simplistic zero-sum interest conflict, based on social class, was not confirmed. Finding not a single dividing line but many suggests hegemony rather than class struggle. In hegemony, exclusions are not only political but also social and ideological. Thus, the state and civil society co-produce the marginalization of certain social interests. Considering the widespread bias against rural interests in Chinese policy-making and publicity, it is not surprising that many NGO staff members share the same bias.

In China, the omission of rural interests on ENGO agendas become amplified by the very hegemonic public sphere. The Chinese government controls public opinion more by marginalizing alternatives than by suppressing speech (Watson 1994; Nie 2005). Although counter-voices exist, no counter-public does. A plurality of opinions and experiences are being voiced, mostly in private or in close circles, but state policy itself remains uncontested in public where hegemonic views dominate. Coherent counterpositions rarely develop from private, localized and atomized opinions. Plurality means that local experiences are rejected as unrepresentative, in contrast to authoritative or hegemonic voices that can be generalized beyond the personal and local. While rural voices remain scattered, NGOs speak with one environmentalist language that facilitates cooperation within civil society and with state officials. The ability to unify and standardize their message, even when they challenge hegemonic growth-oriented ideas, gives ENGOs visibility in the Chinese public.

To neutralize the social bias inherent in ENGO agendas, other associations are needed to represent rural voices in civil society. The Chinese state restricts, however, association that could counterbalance environmentalist discourse with

social justice perspectives. Although the state tolerates middle-class activism, it suppresses openly class-based social activism (Howell 2004, 151–155; Xing 2012). No officially sanctioned farmers or rural migrants' intermediary organization that collects and systematizes rural voices exists in China. Migrant and rural NGOs represent too fragmented segments of migrants or agricultural producers to forge a common position beyond particular situations (Lee and Yuan, 2011; Zhou 2017). Due to the connections the educated middle class has with administrators, Chinese NGO advocacy relies on informal personal contacts with the state (Salmenkari 2008; Eberhardt 2015). Hence, many middle-class NGO demands are not even exposed to public deliberations and contestation before they gain administrative weight.

Omissions on ENGO agendas do not equal the silencing of rural voices. Rural people can have a political voice elsewhere than in organized civil society. Despite the urban bias, some rural concerns voiced by local governments, people's congresses and the media appear in the national-scale public sphere. For solving ecological grievances, the villagers I met during my fieldwork turned to courts or petitioned the government. Thus, the state may be more receptive than NGOs to some social voices.

ENGOS question environmental degradation and the extreme exploitation of natural resources, but they sometimes reproduce social exclusions similar to the official economic growth strategies that neglect those who benefit the least from economic growth. NGOs are evidently not automatically reactionary or progressive. They can stand up to defend hegemony or resist it. To whom NGOs demand inclusion and whose exclusion they help to prolong has to be empirically assessed. NGO-promoted environmentalism challenges the state and the middle-class majority to take environmental considerations seriously, but with rural interests, many ENGO programs are consistent with official programs rendering the rural residents as objects to be transformed.

12. Conclusions

Their preferential economic and geographic position, transnational links and high education are expected to make the middle class the pioneer of civil society development (Huntington 1991). Paradoxically, these same features bring Chinese ENGOS closer to statist discourses than to grassroots experiences. Tertiary education prepares ENGOS for knowledge production modes that separate them as knowledge-producing subjects from the parts of society identified as objects to be problematized and reformed. When NGO plans are future-oriented and transformative, ENGOS help centralize power and change existing social practices. The belief that the environment can be protected through projects in rural areas

that are managed from the urban centers makes NGOs produce knowledge and projects that facilitate state intervention in society. Due to their prevalently urban middle-class backgrounds, NGO involvement may reproduce similar exclusions to state policies and economic growth. Even with ENGO programs, the poor pay a disproportionately large price for environmental protection, although the growing middle class is largely responsible for China's unsustainable ecological footprint.

This chapter initially introduced three conventional theoretical premises. One expected that civil society emerges with the middle class, the second that civil society articulates the voice of society, and the third that society is comprised of a plurality of interests. Theoretically, these presumptions come from modernization theory, the civil society definition based on the state-society boundary, and pluralism, but are present in many other theoretical traditions as well. Of the three, the equation between voices from civil society and the social voice was empirically falsified in this study. Theoretically, middle-class-dominated civil societies can be expected to be biased and ill-equipped to support the voicing and representation of the full array of social interests in a balanced manner. Nevertheless, civil society research in China studies may have ignored this standard theoretical premise. When pluralistic social interests do not overlap, middle-class dominance shapes Chinese civil society in adverse ways.

This study questions the spatial analogy, commonly used to study Chinese NGOs, that pits the state against society. Environmentalism is political not only vis-à-vis the state but also vis-à-vis local communities and individual lifestyle choices within society. To be useful, NGOs' position in the social arena should be defined by their closeness or distance not only from the state but also from other actors in society. Ignoring hegemonic inclinations and pluralistic divisions within society, the state-society boundary indicates poorly where NGOs stand among social actors and interests. As NGO workers come from relatively privileged social backgrounds, NGOs need to be positioned in relation to social distinctions between the powerful and the underrepresented. Whose political participation are NGOs facilitating? When do NGOs contribute to elitism and when to anti-elitism? These questions need to be empirically assessed. It cannot be taken for granted that NGOs remain close to everyone in society simply because they are societal actors.

How can the two other theoretical premises, social pluralism and middle-class dominance in civil society, be reconciled? If the Chinese middle class does not contribute collectively to the formation of an autonomous and democracy-promoting civil society, as some theories expect (Huntington 1991; Lum 2000) but empirical evidence fails to support (Tsai 2007; Lui and Liu 2013; Chen 2013), what does the middle-class domination in Chinese NGO society mean?

The causality between the emergence of NGOs and of the middle class can go both ways. Perhaps it is not the diversification of social interests and yearnings for an independent voice that makes the middle class establish NGOs. Instead, the middle-class domination on the Chinese NGO scene may occur because the Chinese middle class is more familiar with the idea of NGOs due to their transnational connections and language skills. Chinese NGO founders' middle-class backgrounds may enable them to launch organizations that emulate global NGO models. In China, the middle-class position in globalization may explain the emergence of NGOs as relevant organizations more than the pursuit of an independent social voice. This study confirms the global link. It shows that ENGOs introduce agendas new to Chinese governance and the public sphere, but also demonstrates that many of these agendas were adopted from global NGO circles. Thereafter, the realization of NGO goals often brings ENGOs close to the administrative arm of the state instead of increasing the distance between ENGOs and the state.

Civil society does not empower everyone equally but reproduces power inequalities that silence people. Chinese ENGO agendas emphasize urban values and systematically undervalue rural interests. Chinese ENGOs' social embeddedness in the middle class makes them advocate policies that can be detrimental to the interests of less vocal groups in society. Environmental NGOs may be especially likely to exclude some social voices because they appeal to norms and values, not to the interests of collective social groups who can voice their own interests. When they speak for nonhuman or future generations' interests (Catney and Doyle 2011), they are not attuned to current social needs that contradict with their own priorities. If class-specific omissions are not limited to environmentalists but characterize Chinese NGOs in general, NGOs may become yet another channel to exacerbate the over-representation of middle-class interests in Chinese politics.

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