Student environmentalism in Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores student environmentalism in Beijing, China. It traces students' political norms and values, explains their activism and experience of pollution, and investigates the role of environmental non-governmental organisation (ENGOs) in forming youth environmentalism. To serve these objectives, the work takes forward theories on youth activism and agency and recent debates on environmental health, environmentalism and ENGOs. This study was designed as a qualitative research project based primarily on interviews and complemented by ethnographic methods, content analysis, pictorial evidence and survey results provided by the Jane Goodall Institute China. Research findings and methodology are presented in four papers and a framing document. My work challenges labels of agency and activism as either protest and resistance or 'quiescence' and questions the influence of globalisation on activists' norms and values. I put forward 'fragmented activism' as a new concept to capture the nature of youth environmental activism in Beijing.

I contribute to environmental health literature by tracing how young people develop discursive mechanisms to mitigate the fear of air pollution and argue that their response offers invaluable insights into the interplay between space and the body in polluted environments. This thesis further shows that the repertoire of student environmental associations in Beijing represents a type of 'place based environmentalism' (Smith, 2001) but argues that, whilst this may be a contradictory response to contemporary environmental issues, it is not usefully assessed against abstract and normative notions of what environmentalism should be. I also challenge scholarly assessments of ENGO action. By exploring ENGO strategies in China that rely on extant societal and governmental narratives about good citizenship and moral values – instead of radical alternatives to mainstream development models or political processes – I argue for new research paradigms guiding the study of environmental movements.

KEYWORDS: youth; activism; agency; environmental health; space; environmentalism; place; non-governmental organisations; China

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INTRODUCTION

'There is no freedom here' (Wenli, head of the student environmental association at Jiaotong University, Beijing, October 2013)

'China is on its way to Communism' (Wangcheng, head of the student environmental association at Beijing Technology University, Beijing, November 2013)

In light of recent youth uprisings across the globe, and China's emergent environmental crisis, this thesis examines student environmental activism in Beijing. In doing so, four concerns are in play.

First, the political relations and context of student environmental activism in Beijing. With regard to the state, this thesis investigates how students who are involved in environmental activism in Beijing respond to the political climate and the mechanisms of state surveillance to which their activism is subjected. This study critiques recent scholarship on the nature of youth activism and agency, arguing for an approach that acknowledges the diversity of backgrounds and political attitudes in activist groups. It also offers a new analytical tool that allows us to frame youth activism by developing the concept of 'fragmented activism'.

Second, the lived experience of the students engaged in such activism. The thesis traces their reaction to air pollution and explains the action repertoires of student environmental associations (SEAs). Through exploring how these young activists respond to environmental health risks posed by air pollution, I outline the limits of their activism, and explain the interplay between space and the body in shaping students' responses to the risks posed by air

pollution. In doing so, this study makes a contribution to existing scholarship focused upon people's responses to bodily risks and environmental health by adding 'relational space' (Massey, 2005) as an analytical tool to this debate.

Third, the role of place in conditioning those experiences and political relations. The study investigates how a focus on the university campus shapes environmental critique and action offered by student environmental associations, taking debates about place based action further and pointing out the potential of place based action as a gateway into activism.

Fourth, the relationship between students and non-governmental actors. The thesis shows how environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) impact young people's environmental awareness and activism, by employing popular governmental and social narratives. I argue that contemporary scholarly assessments of NGO work should be attuned to the radical potential of NGO strategies that are aimed at being 'mainstream' rather than 'alternative' – especially when scholars are concerned with assessing NGO work in repressive political contexts.

In its arguments and conclusions, this thesis poses a corrective critique to the existing literature and discourse on youth activism, agency and environmentalism, and novel insights into the human geography – the political and social relations – of China's emergent environmental crisis.

China has a long history of student activism, especially over the course of the twentieth century when students were among the leaders and main participant groups of major socio-political transformations such as the civil war, Cultural Revolution and, of course, the Tiananmen protests of 1989. In recent years, contentious political engagement among

students in the form of open protests and demonstrations has largely abated. Scholars of youth activism in China, such as Wright (2012), have suggested that youth activism has simply subsided since the Tiananmen massacre, and have proposed that today's Chinese youth are 'apolitical'. Other research contests this statement and argues that, whilst the political climate has changed, political values held by today's Chinese youth do not differ significantly from those of the 1989 cohort (Chan, 1999; Mason and Clements; 2002).

Youth engagement in environmental campaigning, protests and volunteering, however, has increased significantly since the proliferation of ENGOs in the mid-nineties, signalling degrees of politicisation – or, at least, environmental and social awareness – rarely accounted for in literature on Chinese youth. The state has permitted students to engage in environmental activism within ENGOs and SEAs (see Lu, 2003; Economy, 2005; Yang, 2005). Whilst the majority of youth-run environmental action remains within such university and state-sanctioned parameters, students at Xiamen University openly protested against the building of a petrochemical plant – despite threats of expulsion from the university and the Party in 2007 (Economy, 2007). SEA membership numbers, campaign focuses and organisational structures differ across provinces (Lu, 2003, Wu, 2006). However, the nature of their activism, levels of politicisation, drivers and aims of student environmental activism have not been satisfactorily explored or explained in existing literature – in spite of the fact that the sphere of environmental action offers a unique space for civic action on the part of students, whose activities are usually subject to strict government control and surveillance.

Environmentalism – a unique space for civic action on China's university campuses

The Chinese state's record for repressing activism has been infamously highlighted by the suppression of the Tiananmen student protests in 1989. Since then, the situation for political and social activists and 'dissidents' has not improved much:[1]

Universities have been notoriously well controlled by state surveillance mechanisms since the Tiananmen protests in 1989, both in terms of the censorship of teaching material and in relation to surveillance mechanisms employed to monitor university staff and students (Chan, 1999, Steinmann, 2015, Huang, 2015, Wright, 2012). In exploring political attitudes after Tiananmen on Chinese university campuses, Chan (1999) shows that

> what has clearly changed is that the opportunity structure on Chinese campuses in the 1990s is different from that in the 1980s. Before 1989, the general underdevelopment of China had channelled student interests almost exclusively to the political arena. In the 1990s, the campuses have been under close political surveillance. All official channels of political participation have legally or practically been abolished. It is difficult for students to mobilize resources for another movement. Any challenge to the political authority may result in great sacrifice. (Chan, 1999: 403)

[1] On the recent state of human rights in China, a US state department report notes that: 'Repression and coercion particularly against organizations and individuals involved in rights advocacy and public interest issues were routine. Individuals and groups seen as politically sensitive by authorities continued to face tight restrictions on their freedom to assemble, practice religion, and travel. Efforts to silence and intimidate political activists and public interest lawyers continued to increase. Authorities resorted to extra legal measures such as enforced disappearance, "soft detention," and strict house arrest, including house arrest of family members, to prevent the public voicing of independent opinions. Public interest law firms that took on sensitive cases continued to face harassment, disbarment of legal staff, and closure.' (United States Department of State, 2012)

Researching state control in the twenty first century, Huang (2015) confirms the government's control over young people's lives in today's China, asserting that the Chinese state continues to exert

> extensive and exquisite controls over a full spectrum of social and individual aspects in youth, including real space like the university campus and internet bars, virtual space like internet chatrooms, blogs and social media, and various markets for semi-public goods like welfare housing, health care, and education (Huang, 2015: 242f).

Reporting on a number of incidences at Peking University in 2012, the Los Angeles Times described how the Communist Youth League attempts to control all aspects of student life, writing that '*it can be a tortuous endeavour for students to simply engage in extracurricular activities. Registered groups are tightly controlled by a draconian bureaucracy, and unregistered groups (...) often face restrictions, intimidation and worse'* (Kaiman, 2012). Writing about the increased scrutiny of surveillance mechanisms since 2012, Steinfeld (2015) also affirms that 'since Xi Jinping came to power at the end of 2012, universities have been a particular focus of Xi's attempts to suppress freedom of expression' (Steinfeld, 2015: 46).

Registering any group at the university is a heavily censored process, severely limiting the possibilities for civic politics on the part of students. However, the government and university authorities have made an exception for those student organisations which have made environmental activism their declared aim; their unique position as a platform for civic action arises from a number of factors. First, environmental activism is a subject that – different to other issues areas such as labour protests, or minority interests – affects the majority of the Chinese population, independent – to a degree at least – of social background (Economy, 2012; Albert and Xu, 2016). Second, environmental health concerns are endangering regime

stability and forcing the government to allow certain levels of civic participation or risk losing regime legitimacy in the eyes of the populace (Huang, Y., 2015; Albert and Xu, 2016; Lang and Xu, 2013). Third, even from a purely economic standpoint, environmental degradation is costing the country enormous resources – both natural and financial – requiring the government to support citizens' growing awareness of environmental problems and to promote pro-environmental behaviour (Economy, 2012; Shapiro, 2012; Huang, Y. 2015).

During the Mao era (1949–1978), non-governmental organisations were an unthinkable phenomenon, and their emergence during the reform era (1978 -) – when China opened its doors to international trade and reformed its economy to an increasingly market-oriented system – led to much academic debate about the return of civil society and the potential for democratisation through non-state actors (see for instance Ho, 2001; Geall, 2013; Yang, 2005; Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Ru and Ortolano, 2009). As the largest emergent economy in the world, China's economic development over the past 30 years has been unprecedented in terms of both its speed and its impact – on China itself, and the world at large. The country's economic development has afforded China access to global economic networks such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and has positioned it amongst the most influential global diplomatic players. This development, however, has come at an extremely high cost to the country's natural environment and to the health of its citizens. The Chinese state is home to 16 out of the 20 most polluted cities in the world; up to 90% of its groundwater is polluted, and issues such as deforestation and desertification have negatively affected agriculture and caused severe natural catastrophes such as floods (Liu and Diamond, 2005: 1181). Additionally, these developments have led to a vast increase in pollution-related health issues including lung cancer, chronic bronchitis and premature deaths (Liu and Diamond, 2005: 1182). According to Economy (2013), two thirds of the country's cities cannot meet China's (relatively lenient) air-quality standards: a challenge that has been exacerbated by the

country's continued reliance on coal, which accounts for 85% of its sulphur dioxide emissions and 70% of its particulate emissions (Economy, 2013: 199f, citing Greenpeace, 2008). Economy further cites land and soil degradation, desertification and – most significantly– water pollution, as the most perilous environmental issues resulting from decades of two-digit economic growth (for further details see Economy, 2013).

Since the early 1990s, fears over health issues and public concern over the continuous and increasingly visible degradation of the natural environment have led to manifold forms of protest and resistance against commercial and governmental actors across the country (Sun and Zhao, 2008; Jing, 2003). Individual activists, large-scale protests, online activism and, gradually, even state media outlets are appealing to – and putting pressuring on – local and central governments to step up efforts to protect China's environment and its citizens. Some of the most attention-grabbing protests have featured distinctly 'not-in-my-back-yard' (Nimby) characters, but their scale and contentious nature has nonetheless challenged party leadership and control (Johnson, 2010). Plans to build petrochemical plants in Dalian, Xiamen and Ningbo, for instance, led to thousands of protesters gathering on the streets, forcing construction to stop (Kennedy, 2012). According to the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences, the number of environmental 'mass incidents' has grown at an average of 29% annually between 1996 and 2011 (Kennedy, 2012, Feng and Wang, 2012).

In response to this emergent environmental and political crisis, the Chinese Communist Party has opened up political space for environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) and student environmental associations (SEAs) to arise, and to aid the government in its quest for environmental sustainability. In 1994, the first ENGO, 'Friends of Nature', was founded in Beijing. Since then, a wide array of ENGO forms and campaign focuses have flourished in both urban and rural areas. According to Yang (2005) and Gao (2013), Chinese ENGOs have

experienced explosive growth since the founding of 'Friends of Nature'. Citing numbers provided by the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, Gao (2013) suggests that China had approximately 212,000 social groups in 2008, with 5,330 being of the 'environmental variety' (Gao, 2013).

This study's focus on environmentalism – as a lens through which to investigate youth political values and norms in contemporary China – arose from the unique space for civic politics that the environmental movement provides for Chinese youth. The urgency of environmental problems and the state's inability to implement measures to curb pollution has turned environmental activism into a sphere of civic influence that is both desired and feared by the state. The necessity to educate the population about environmentally-friendly behaviour has allowed environmental youth groups a degree of freedom to publicly campaign, to set up institutions across provinces (like the China Youth Climate Action Network) and to become an influence on Chinese university campuses (Yang, 2005; Lu, 2003; Wu, 2005; Economy, 2012).

In reviewing the emergence and expansion of activism in the environmental field, Yang (2005) reviews ENGOs roles as political actors (including student environmental associations) and argues that 'ENGOs constitute a new field where citizens may practise political skills, organize and participate in civic action, and test political limits' (Yang, 2005:65). According to Economy (2012) and Yang (2005), China's young are among the main constituents of the environmental movement as they provide a large support base for ENGO campaigns, and numbers of SEA members continue to grow across China. Academic research on youth environmentalism has allowed for some critical insights into the organisation, growth of and personalities behind some youth-run environmental organisations (Wu, 2006; Lu, 2003; Pulver, 2009). However, studies on the nature of youth

environmentalism have yielded largely inconclusive and sometimes opposing results. Based on a survey of environmental awareness of university students in Beijing, for instance, Stalley and Yang (2006) conclude that 'China is not in the midst of an environmental social movement' (Stalley and Yang, 2006). Wong's (2003) results, on the other hand – also based on the survey of university students in Beijing – suggest that 'the rising environmental awareness among these young intellectuals would ultimately spark increased environmental activism in China' (Wong, 2003: 536). Investigating young people's motivations, attitudes, behavioural norms and action repertoire is key to our understanding of the Chinese environmental movement, and is equally crucial in furthering scholarly debate about the nature of contemporary Chinese youth – their political, social and cultural norms.

Environmental non-governmental organisation – co-opted or rebels?

Some ENGOs are concerned with raising this next generation of environmentalists, and focus all of their efforts on educating the country's youth about environmental problems and pro-environmental behaviour. According to Yang (2005), ENGOs fall into roughly seven categories: registered NGOs, non-profit enterprises, unregistered voluntary groups, web-based groups, student environmental associations, university research groups and so-called 'government organized NGOs' (social organisations established by government agencies). Schwartz (2004) distinguishes between government-organised NGOs, NGOs and semi-NGOs. The variety in definition stems from various levels of affiliation to government bodies and funding sources – but neither the terms NGO, nor GONGO, nor terms found in other literature, are likely to clearly identify ENGO positionality, as both organisational affiliation and funding changes continuously. For the purposes of this dissertation, organisations investigated during fieldwork are focused on the environmental education of young people and are referred to as environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs).

The acceptance of environmentalism as a space for civic action by local and central governments is by no means a blank cheque for uncensored campaigning. Instead, ENGOs commonly aim to work with the government rather than in opposition to it. This strategy has alarmed some onlookers and suggests that the environmental movement has been 'co-opted' and 'corporatized'. Others, however, applaud ENGOs for their political acumen, calling them 'conformist rebels' (Zhang and Barr, 2013) or suggesting that their strategy is a form of 'embedded activism' (Ho and Edmonds, 2007) that is a necessary, temporary phase on China's road towards political reform. Scholars such as Ho and Edmonds (2007) and Cooper (2006) have hailed ENGOs as bringers of political and social change: an opinion that, though contested in academic circles, seems to be shared by government officials, who have recently drawn up a 'draconian new law' (Hilton, 2015) aimed at censoring, controlling and monitoring non-governmental entities in China.

In order to gain a comprehensive insight into the different actors shaping youth environmental activism, I assess the role of ENGOs focused on the environmental education of youth in shaping young people's activism. I focus on three different ENGOS: firstly, the Jane Goodall Institute China, which educates school and university students on a vast array of environmental issues, including animal protection, water pollution and organic food; secondly, the Green Student Forum, which aims to equip university students with the knowledge and skills to start their own environmental protection initiatives; and, thirdly, the China Youth Climate Action Network, which is concerned with raising student awareness of global warming and sustainable development. I concentrate on these organisations because school and university students are at the core of the mission and form the support base of these Beijing-based environmental education NGOs.

In this thesis, I show that contemporary labels of activism – both youth activism in general and environmental activism more specifically – fail to account for the diversity present in activist groups and the highly complicated interplay between youth and state surveillance. I also highlight the tensions between young people's activism and the economic imperatives that can cause inconsistencies in activism not accounted for or explained in extant literature. Rather than basing my assessment on a normative perspective of what environmental activism could or should achieve, I take forward scholarship in the area of environmentalism and NGO work, and call for new research paradigms attuned to the realities of activism in repressive states. In particular, I argue that repressive political environments and modern environmental threats may necessitate a focus on small-scale change and attempts to frame environmental activism and pro-environmental behaviour as mainstream rather than alternative or radical.

Research objectives

Research for this dissertation was thus aimed at investigating the following interrelated questions regarding youth involvement in environmental protection campaigning on campus, as an employee of – or in co-operation with – ENGOs:

How does the involvement of Chinese youth in environmental action compare to youth activism and agency in other parts of the world?

How does exposure to environmental health risk affect young people's environmental activism and plans for the future?

How do Chinese students formulate environmental critique and action?

How do ENGOs aim to educate Chinese youth about environmental issues?

To capture the diversity of opinions and behaviour in this group of young people, I present my results in four papers, each discussing different aspects of my research in depth – but also relating to findings in my other papers.

I critically analyse how student environmental activism in China compares to young people's activism elsewhere, and suggest the concept 'fragmented activism' to capture the nature of young people's engagement with the environmental movement. This topic is explored with regard to recent academic debate on the nature of youth activism around the world, and highlights definitional issues of 'activism' and recent contributions to alternative forms of youth agency. The second paper focuses on the example of air pollution to assess how exposure to environmental risk affects young people's environmental activism and plans for the future. Here, I contribute to scholarly work on citizens' responses to environmental health threats, by focusing on the relationship between space and the body and explaining how 'polluted spaces' may be discursively renegotiated as 'developed spaces'. In paper three, I outline how a focus on the environmental protection of specific places plays out in the development of environmental critique amongst Beijing's university students, and take forward scholarly understandings of place based action. In the last paper, I draw attention to three environmental education NGOs who focus on the environmental education of school and university students. I consider the part that these organisations play in educating the country's youth about the environment and I show that their strategies necessitate scholars to review research paradigms commonly employed in work on third sector organisations.

This dissertation is thus concerned with a discussion of youth environmentalism in China: a phenomenon that I explore against the background of contemporary discussions of youth

activism, environmental health, environmentalism and ENGO engagement. I contribute to the discussion in these fields – both theoretically and empirically – through the case-study of China. In order to also provide a contextualisation of the Chinese environmental movement, student activism and contemporary Chinese youth, I have provided a literature review on these subjects in the relevant papers and in this document. I also provide relevant literature reviews on the theoretical underpinnings of space, place, environmentalism and environmental health. Throughout this study, I refer to 'youth' or 'young people' – a term which I employ in order to describe students and/or young people who are no longer enrolled in courses but who are working in environmental NGOs – and 'students', where I refer exclusively to the youth enrolled in university education.[2]

[2] Pseudonyms are used throughout the papers and the framing document to protect the anonymity of my respondents.

Paper 1

Fragmented activism: young environmentalists in urban China

On Chinese youth political culture and the impracticability of international academic labels of youth activism and agency.

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss political values of contemporary Chinese youth. I demonstrate that students associate revolutionary acts and protests with chaos (luan) and trace their reaction to state surveillance mechanisms and their approach to environmental activism in particular. The paper explores students' motivations and aims for joining environmental campaigns, and exposes a broad spectrum of political norms and values underlying such activism. I question the analytical value of recent efforts to develop labels of youth activism and agency such as 'Activisms 2010+' and 'active quiescence'. Instead, I propose the notion of 'fragmented activism' to capture the diversity within activist groups and to acknowledge the breadth of values underlying environmental activism and levels of politicisation in Chinese youth.

KEYWORDS: activism; agency; Activisms 2010+, active quiescence; fragmented activism, China

Paper 2

Chinese lungs: how Chinese university students negotiate environmental health risks and plans for the future in polluted environments.

Abstract

In this article I put forward 'relational space' (Massey, 2005) as a crucial additional lens through which social scientists can productively explore people's response to environmental health risks. By exploring how young environmental activists in Beijing respond to the health risks associated with air pollution I show how polluted space is perceived and negotiated. I argue that economic uncertainties and pressure to secure a financial future lead students to try to ignore the risks posed by air pollution. Instead, such types of environmental pollution are framed as signposts of economic development, and the risks associated with exposure are marginalised in both their activism and everyday behaviour. Crucially, for '*polluted space*' to become '*developed space*', Chinese youth also assign qualities to their bodies in comparison to other groups (such as foreigners, the elderly and children) that allow them reduce their fear of exposure. I argue that the main coping mechanisms with regard to air pollution are discursive practices, rather than embodied ones, and show that these discursive practices result from the interrelation between students' personal ambitions for economic security, and the narrative they attach to Beijing as a space of opportunity.

KEYWORDS: Environmental health, economic uncertainty, risk, space, body, youth, China

Paper 3

Place and environmentalism: How a focus on the campus shapes environmentalist critique and action amongst university students in Beijing

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Abstract

This study explores environmentalism among Beijing's student environmental associations and analyses their focus on the university campus as the centre of their campaign efforts. Through this lens the paper discusses how a focus on place affects environmental critique and action. Studies such as those by Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) on environmentalism in the United States have suggested that a focus on the protection of specific places can lead to a situation where environmental activism effectively fails to address contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change, unsustainable consumption patterns and pollution. Armiero and Sedrez (2014) echo this concern and suggest that modern environmental threats necessitate a 'think globally, act locally' approach to environmentalism as 'nobody and no place can be environmentally safe separated from the whole' (Armiero and Sedrez, 2014: 4). This article outlines how Chinese students' emphasis upon the environmental and social qualities of the university campus shapes the development of environmental critique and campaigning. I argue that the Chinese case highlights the need for a more critical analysis of the inconsistencies undergirding 'place based' environmentalism. I also show that place based environmentalism can serve as a crucial initial step towards the development of basic environmental awareness and can in fact represent a logical response to broader scale issues.

KEYWORDS: place; environmentalism; students; China

Paper 4

Strategies of youth environmental education NGOs in China.

Changing research paradigms in assessing NGO positionality and effectiveness.

Abstract

Literature on the role of non-governmental organisations (henceforth NGOs) tends to focus on whether or not they provide a real alternative to established governmental and institutional settings and the capitalist mode of economic development. This debate is also prominent in scholarship on NGOs working in China, especially amongst researchers tracing NGO engagement in the environmental sector. One of the most pressing questions in these discussions is whether environmental NGOs provide Chinese society with the opportunity to bring about real reforms to environmental law and policy. Ultimately, the debate also seeks to evaluate whether they strengthen civil society and could be a catalyst for democratic change in a one-party state. This article informs these debates by investigating environmental NGOs focused on the environmental education of children and young people in Beijing. By tracing how and which values environmental NGOs aim to instil in the current generation of school and university students, I discuss their role in working towards an alternative development model and explain their strategies for change. I show that, instead of providing radical alternatives to mainstream development models or political processes, they ride on extant societal and governmental narratives about good citizenship and moral values. Rather than seeking to applaud or dismiss these ENGOs potential for radical social transformation, however, this article argues for a change in paradigm in NGO research that is attuned to non-radical or 'mainstream' approaches to societal transformations.

KEYWORDS: place; environmentalism; students; China

Context, literature review and theoretical constructs

Student activism in China

Students are important political agents in China and might be considered a major force in the fight to protect and improve the environment (Economy, 2012). In recent history, the Tiananmen protests marked the last major demonstrations by students and the only major popular threat to CCP governance in decades. Up until the protests' brutal repression in 1989, student involvement in politics had been a recurrent and crucial element in the forging of China's state-society relations (Rosen, 2009; Wright, 2012). Lanza (2012) suggests 1898 to be the starting point of a stream of student-led movements that motivated and at times directed China's socio-political trajectory over the course of the 20th century. In 1898, students of Peking University presented reform proposals to the emperor who attempted to initiate a political, economical and educational reform programme that was stopped by a coup d'état only a hundred days later (Lanza, 2012). Throughout the following decades students emerged as major players in nationwide political campaigns such as the May 4th New Culture Movement (referred to as May Fourth or May Fourth Movement) and the vast majority of the student body then became an important supporter of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) struggle for power against the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT). After Mao Zedong's declaration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1st 1949 students continued to play decisive political roles, particularly during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976. Yet despite the high profile of student politics throughout these struggles, the dynamics of student groups, their motivations and aims remain the subject of academic debate. The May Fourth New Culture Movement for instance is described by Chen (1970) as the anti-imperialist and anti-warlord reaction of the Chinese people to the Versailles treaty, spearheaded by large-scale student protests in Beijing on May 4th 1919. Yet it is considered

by some as two movements rather than one, one organised around 'New Culture' that can be traced back to the ideas of the 1898 student reformists and the other a patriotic 'May Fourth' movement aimed at saving the nation (Schwarcz, 1986). Similarly divergent conclusions emerge from scholarship about the role of students during the warlord era and the Chinese Civil War. From the mid 1920s to 1949, China was faced with both the continued internal struggle for power between the KMT and CCP in form of a civil war as well as the invasion of Japanese forces into Manchuria. According to Lutz (1971) the Chinese student movement of 1945 to 1949 was united by it nationalistic outlook and generational conflict between students and their parents. He contends that the students regarded themselves as the intellectual elite with the right and responsibility to speak for the Chinese people and strongly rejected the traditionalist values of their fathers, which they believed to be the source of China's weak position vis-à-vis the West. Pepper (1971) considers the student movement to have been essentially an anti-war movement aimed primarily at ending Japanese invasion and an end to civil war. During the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' students from all ages were called on by Mao Zedong to purge the 'capitalist' and 'elitist' elements in the Party, including academics and educators. Students in Beijing were the first to organise as 'Red Guards' and started to fulfil the Chairman's demands, and what started as humorous ideas such as changing street names and traffic light regulations soon turned into a nationwide regime of arbitrary terror and torture (Herberer, 2009). Wang (1999) calls these events a 'revolution from above' and depicts the majority of Red Guard students not as revolutionaries that tried to battle old power structures but rather as rebels who 'simply sought to maximise their own power' (Wang, 1999: 197). In 1976 the CCP regime ended the nationwide upheavals by employing the armed forces and since then the Cultural Revolution decade remains a traumatic memory. Heberer (2009) suggests that '[e]ven now the fear of social and political instability still prevails among the political elites as well as among the common people, because instability is equated with Mao's political campaigns and particularly with

the experiences of the Cultural Revolution and therefore with chaos (luan)' (Herberer, 2009: 180). This is also clearly reflected in student rhetoric during the last student protests on Tiananmen Square in 1989, when students tried to firmly distinguish themselves from the Red Guard generation (Lanza, 2013). The Tiananmen protests, which were infamously repressed by the Chinese army and led to the massacre of students and civilians in Beijing, was based around demands for democratisation and political and institutional reform. In this thesis, I show how the continued association of protest action with 'luan' impacts young people's activism today.

Another element of debate is the categorisation of these movements as 'youth' or 'student'. Although mainly consisting of students, historians like Lanza (2012) question whether such a categorisation is truly reflective of their dynamics. He uses May Fourth, the beginnings of the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen protests as examples to argue that whilst these were indisputably linked to young people, and students in particular, their association with categories such as 'youth' is not straightforward. Due to the extremely different perceptions towards 'youth movements' such as the May Fourth movement and the Cultural Revolution within society, students during the Tiananmen protests for instance largely avoided the term 'youth' or 'student' protests in order to avoid comparison with the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The various interpretations of student roles within socio-political developments as well as the dilemma described by Lanza (2012) in employing the terms 'youth movement' or 'student movement' when describing any of these developments continues in contemporary scholarship on the politicisation, norms and values of Chinese youth. In this thesis I suggest the concept 'fragmented activism' to capture the diversity of political opinions underlying youth activism and the complex relationship between youth and the state.

According to Wright (2012) student politics have abated entirely since the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square. She cites China's move to a mass education system and increased job competition as a reason for students to foster ties with rather than reject the ruling elites (Wright, 2012: 53). The recent governmental battle against 'Western Thought' in Chinese universities, however, indicates otherwise (Steinfeld, 2015). The Chinese state remains worried about student politics and has ordered the teaching of President's Xi Jinping's thought. Scholars such as Long (1999) and Mason and Clements (2002) suggest that in fact prospects for new protests have by no means subsided. Mason and Clements (2002) suggest that increased economic prosperity has not led to the diffusion of social grievances and that instead 'changes in the patterns of state-society relations arguably could engender new sources of grievance on the part of students and workers, new mobilizing structures to initiate and sustain collective action, and new opportunities for dissidents to mobilize collective action against the party state' (Mason and Clements, 2002: 160). Tanner (2004) suggests that the occurrence of 'mass incidents' has grown to such a level that forces the Party to rethink its strategy for dealing with social unrest. One such source of unrest is the government's inability to curb environmental pollution. Environmental degradation is endangering not only China's economic sustainability but also alerting the public to growing health concerns and thereby threatening to undermine CCP legitimacy. Numbers of 'mass incidents' due to environmental concerns have risen by 29% annually according to the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences (Kennedy, 2012; Feng and Wang, 2012).

Activism versus 'acquiescent activism' – global trends and the China case

In a 2012 special issue of *Development and Change,* researchers of contemporary activism coined the term 'Activisms 2010+' to capture contemporary activisms around the globe. They compare activist strategy and motivations across countries as diverse as Tunisia, Syria, the

United States, Mexico, India and numerous others and suggest that these studies may indicate a new era of activism that signals a 'tipping point in a globalisation of disaffection' (Biekart and Fowler, 2013: 527). Activisms 2010+, as outlined by the editors of the special issue are characterised by a novel action repertoire, united by a common set of rights-based demands and energised through contemporary communication technologies. These rights-based demands, according to the Glasius and Pleyers (2013) call for democracy, social justice and dignity. Whilst suggesting that Activisms 2010+ may represent a distinct shift in the character of resistance, the contributors stay true to social movement literature that has focused on contentious collective political action as markers of social movements and activism. Although suggestive of a new era of activism, Biekart and Fowler (2013) focus on 'contentious action' directed at the state or some form of 'power holder' as a qualifying characteristic for a social movement, a view that has been increasingly challenged in academia for years. Snow (2004) for example argues 'against the recent crystallization of "contentious politics" as the anchoring concept for the study of collective action on the grounds that it is overly restrictive, foreclosing consideration and analysis of much social movement activity not tied directly to government or the state and which thus falls beyond the bailiwick of the political arena' (Snow, 2004: 3). The idea that the action of a social movement is not necessarily directed at the state is supported by Van Dyke et al.'s (2004) analysis of the 'targets' of social movements. The authors show that within any movement there is wide range of action repertoires, including of course protests and government lobbying but encompassing tactics such as media appearances, street performances and clothing styles that are aimed at shaping social norms, practices and cultural values rather than official policy. Biekart and Fowler (2013) recognise the difficulty inherent in defining activism and social movements which is made more complicated by research such as Bayat's (2013) on the origins of the Egyptian revolution. Bayat's (2013) contribution alerts readers to the salience of what he terms 'non-

movement movements' as forerunners of the Tahrir Square protests: non-deliberate, dispersed acts of contentious politics by constituencies such as the urban poor and urban youth.

Further complicating the debate about contemporary social movements are discussions about the role of national and international NGOs. Harcourt's (2013) work on the Association for Women's Rights in Development argues for a continued role of NGOs in post-2010 activism. She argues for NGO relevance (despite their reliance on donor money) and clear, at least somewhat hierarchical organisational structures which run contrary to the action repertoire and organisation associated with contemporary activisms as outlined by Glasius and Pleyers (2013). In an article pre-dating the 2011 uprisings, Pleyers together with Juris (2009), already attempted to redefine contemporary youth activism, suggesting that today's youth relies on 'alter-activism' characterised by an emphasis on pre-figurative politics, that is lived experiences as well as non-hierarchical networks, direct action and the use of new information and communications technologies (Juris and Pleyers, 2009). With regard to Activisms 2010+ literature and scholarship focused on pre-figurative politics, Jeffrey (2014) questions assumptions across this literature that this activism is necessarily based on pre-figurative politics, 'pro-social dispositions', non-hierarchical organisation and technological innovation. He describes everyday youth politics and cites instances of organised, social and individualised forms of youth assertion. His review serves to show how diverse youth action repertoire is and that youth assertion can be simultaneously progressive and directed at battling injustice whilst also at times deepening extant inequalities by accepting certain aspects of the status quo. The picture of youth activism that emerges from this review complicates attempts to summarise contemporary activism under banners such as 'Activisms 2010+'.

Further recent contributions to our understanding of youth agency and politics are works such as Dyson's research on 'active quiescence' in rural India (Dyson, 2014) and Mahmood's (2005) work on 'Politics of Piety' in Egypt. Dyson (2014) examines the working lives of youths in rural India and suggests that young people may in fact decide to submit to established structures of power and dominance as they view their quiescence to be the most effective strategy to reach their aims. Her work is focused on the theorisation of youth agency rather than a debate of activism. In 'Politics of Piety', Mahmood's (2005) work on young women in Egypt, traces women's apparent submission to established hierarchical norms in the Egyptian mosque movement. She challenges notions of agency as resistance and suggests that rather than judging these women based on Western liberal understandings of agency, contemporary scholarship should include alternative conceptions of freedom and agency beyond those of resistance and contentious politics. Daly (2010) relates discussions of agency to the realm of activism in her account of Islamically inspired volunteerism amongst young Egyptian women. She contends that this type of volunteerism 'presents an alternative notion of activism that turns away from liberal prescriptions' (Daly, 2010: 59).

Entailed in the above discussion then is the question of 'what counts as activism?', a debate that is highly relevant to the case of the civil society, youth politics and social movement research in China. In a recent special issue of online political contestation in China, Szablewicz questions what 'constitutes the political?' (Szablewicz, 2014: 260) and suggests that since the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street we harbour romanticised ideas of youth activism and political contestations. Especially with regard to the environmental movement, scholarship on Chinese civil society and activism is concerned with the definition of activism. 'Environmentalism' in China ranges from street protests and 'letter writing' to the government to environmental awareness campaigns and tree-planting activities. Recent works on the relationship between health and environmental protests for instance serve to showcase

the diversity present in the movement, in terms of motivations for protest, action repertoire and outcomes (see for example: Lora-Wainwright, 2013 and Johnson, 2010). Not all of these environmental campaigns are contentious or directed at the state and attitudes and behavioural patterns behind these different responses must be understood in order to assess the movement's potential for social and political change. To this end, researchers have largely focused on the Chinese ENGO landscape (including both foreign and Chinese-run organisations), the role of the media (Yang and Calhoun, 2007), law and litigation (Wang, 2006; van Rooij, 2010) or examined local environmental protests (Yang, 2005; Jing, 2003; Sun and Zhao, 2008). Irrespective of whether studies consider urban or rural environmental activism, there is no consensus amongst researchers about the motivations behind or the impact of protests and ENGO work. What is debated here is not just different forms of environmentalism but whether an 'environmental movement' in China even exists and, if so, how far this movement carries within it an agenda for social and political change.

Given the huge impact that environmentalism and environmental movements have had on global society, it is not surprising that scholars of China were quick to see this development as a potential precursor to large-scale social and political transformations. The lack of contentious political action within the Chinese green movement has led academics such as Ho to argue that 'green social organisations are increasingly courting government approval and influence in policy-making, rather than seeking a potentially dangerous confrontation with the national state' (Ho, 2001: 917). Since the movement's emergence coincided with the government's own 'green agenda' Ho (2001) goes on to state that the green movement 'lacks both the opportunity and the immediate urgency to openly confront the government' (Ho, 2001: 920). He also suggests, however, that through the strategy currently employed by green activists–the courting of government officials and working within the government-sanctioned space–the movement may prove able to reform the system from within. Essentially, whether

the absence of 'contentious action' is beneficial or harmful for the movement's agenda remains unanswered. Yang (2005) for instance considers this co-operation with the state to be a useful method of advancing the green agenda that, in combination with other social organisations, 'may provide the necessary organisational basis for a vibrant civil society, which itself is often considered as a foundation for democracy' (Yang, 2005: 65). Issues of activism, agency and acquiescence, akin to the questions raised by Dyson (2014), Daly (2010) and Mahmood (2005) are also explored in the work of van Rooij et al. (2014) on environmental activists in rural China. They coin the term 'activist acquiescence' in their assessment of environmental activism in a Chinese village and suggest that activism can also occur within given power parameters, where villagers accept the limitations of their activism as they perceive their acquiescence affords them the justice they are seeking from local government (van Rooij et al., 2014).

Young people are among the main constituents of the environmental movement (Yang, 2005; Economy, 2004). On university campuses in particular the establishment and growth of environmental student groups have become the norm rather than the exception (Lu, 2003). This has led scholars such as Lu (2003) to hail student environmental associations as the platform for the next generation of NGO leaders, teachers and policymakers. A survey-based study on Chinese youth environmentalism, however, altogether dismisses the movement's potential to bring about political change based on the fact that it is not 'characterized in traditional terms of contentious political action [such as social resistance and protest, mass mobilization, public pressure lobbying, and so on]' (Stalley and Yang, 2006: 333). Wong (2003) concludes the opposite and suggests that student awareness of environmental problems is likely to spark increased environmental activism. Paper one turns to debates on activism and agency by tracing recent developments in youth activism across the globe and contrasting

this with debates about the nature of the Chinese environmental movement and students' political outlook in particular.

Chinese youth

Research on Chinese youth, especially urban and university-educated youth, over the past 20 years has created a rather damning picture of the generations raised during and after China's 'economic miracle'. Cockain (2012) points out that traditionally the Chinese term for youth (qingnian) has been associated with hope, courage and dynamism (Cockain 2012:4, citing Kwong, 1994). He then contends that Chinese youth has since shifted in the perception of the Chinese public and the West, and general descriptions tend to include words such as 'me-generation', 'little emperors', 'a generation grown up in their parents arms', 'without thought for the future, mankind or the motherland', 'distant to the Party', 'doubting of the motherland', 'boastful', 'dishonest and arrogant' (Cockain, 2012: 4f).[3]

Much of the above-listed terminology relates back to the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979 in an effort to curb population growth that was thought to be slowing down economic progress and was unsustainable if left uncontrolled. The effect of this policy has been widely discussed especially its detrimental consequences in the countryside where sex-selective abortions and even infanticide of females was used to ensure that the only child allowed would be male (Banister, 2004). Due to recent nationwide outcries over forced abortions and the increasingly detrimental effect of the unbalanced sex ratio the policy has now been modified slightly and is likely to undergo further review in the future. In respect to educated urban youth, however, the idea of 'the little emperor' has remained predominant in the discussion of the one-child policy and its mark on contemporary society (Cockain, 2012). In a

[3] For an even longer and continuously damning list of words associated with Chinese youth in contemporary scholarship, see Cockain, 2012: 4f.

Science article investigating the causal impact of the one-child policy, results suggested that this radical approach to population control has produced 'significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals' (Cameron et al., 2013: 953). Cockain (2012) however, as well as Szablewicz (2014) consider the sweeping and damning characterisations of entire generations, brought forward in much of the literature, both over-simplified and two-dimensional and suggest a more careful, less biased approach to the study of China's young.

Vickers (2009) points out that the Chinese school system remains highly centralised in its curriculum development and continues to serve an important role in the political socialisation of the country's youth, especially through obligatory high school courses such as 'Thought and Politics' that aims at teaching patriotic values and ideological correctness. Although Vickers (2009) contends that the effect of such teaching is dependent on many factors, individual personality amongst them, he regards such courses to have a sizable impact on the political outlook of Chinese youth. For her widely read book 'Only Hope: Growing up under China's One-Child Policy', Fong (2004) researched high school students and their families in the city of Dalian. She explores how under this policy parents (and grandparents) invest all their resources in their only child, creating 'first world youth in the third world' (Fong, 2004: 154). Recent quantitative research by Xi, Sun and Xiao (2006) confirmed this and showed that since the beginning of the 21st century educational expenses have risen significantly in relation to total household spending (Xi, Sun and Xiao, 2006: 82). According to Fong (2002) and Liu, F. (2006) this has meant improvements in gender equality as educational investment and support of children seems to be the same for male and female children. On the other hand this is creating enormous pressure for 'the singletons', leading to stress and anxiety related to their filial duties. The concept of 'filial piety' has been increasingly researched to understand the complex web of intergenerational dependencies in a now ageing society. By 2025, 'the

rate of caring for the aged for the working population will reach 59.5%' (Xi, 2006: 92). During my fieldwork in Beijing 'filial piety' was even turned into an official law to ensure that children visited their elders. Under the new 'Elderly Protection Law' children must visit their parents 'often' and are warned against 'overlooking or neglecting the elderly' (Feng, 2013). Fong (2004) points out that although all family resources go towards one child, this child is then expected to turn its educational currency into a job that will lift its parents (and sometimes grandparents) into a middle-class existence, an expectation that, according to Schucher (2014) is less and less likely to be fulfilled.

Since China's opening-up policies in the 1980s, the Chinese education system has seen an incredible transformation from elite to mass higher education. The percentage of Chinese youth enrolled in higher education rose from 3.5% in 1991 to 23% in 2007, with 27 million students enrolled (Li, 2009). This focus on academic qualifications is born of the belief that economic opportunity and financial security will follow (Schucher, 2014). Liu's (2008) research on Chinese college students' quest for academic credentials suggests students' desire for a middle-class lifestyle does not allow them to 'stand still on the academic road' (Liu, 2008: 193). During the time of the research for this dissertation in 2013, seven million university students graduated in China joining a pool of college graduates that earn less than migrant workers, characterised as 'educated underemployment' (Huang, 2015: 240).

The duality of pressure from having to care for parents and decreasing job prospects despite holding academic credentials has led to a situation where students are increasingly anxious, stressed and depressed (Chen et al., 2013). The rise of suicides and attempted suicides at China's universities is widely discussed in the media (Eimer, 2009) and has led scholars such as Bregnbaeck (2011) to suggest that the pressure of education weighs more heavily on only-children, leading to increased suicide and suicide attempts. Suicide has now become the

leading cause of death in the university student population and is considered a serious public health problem (Zhai, et al., 2015). Most studies relate stress, anxiety and suicide to academic pressures as well as continually worsening employment situations after graduation. In response to their inability to secure jobs and live up to the high expectations of society, Chinese youth have also responded by creating a self-mocking 'loser' (*diaosi*) discourse to describe their generation, leading journalist David Cohen to suggest the *diaosi* culture may represent China's next 'youth movement' (Cohen, 2013) as it is becoming more and more mainstream for youth to refer to themselves as a male or female *diaosi* (as opposed to another internet meme, *gaofushuai*, which means tall, rich and handsome). In a recent special issue of *China Information*, Szablewicz (2014) suggests that 'the diaosi meme takes aim at these conventional and socially sanctioned models of success, questioning, in particular, the extent to which such models are achievable in the context of contemporary China' (Szablewicz, 2014: 270).

Intense stress, anxiety and self-mocking stands in stark contrast to the idea of 'little emperors' that is so prevalent in research on Chinese youth. In a study on value changes in an era of college-educated young people, Wang (2006) also dismisses college-educated youth as overly individualistic and materialistic but also suggest the existence of a 'moral crisis' in today's university students. A United Nations report found evidence of increasing volunteering activities amongst Chinese youth directed at a diversity of social issues and disaster relief programmes (United Nations Development Programme, 2011). Also, as evidenced by my own research and that of other researchers and journalists, youth involvement in environmental activism is on the rise across the nation (Lu, 2003; Wu, 2006; Pulver, 2009). Kan (2013) points out how 'discussion of Chinese youth in the popular media is often obscured by such unhelpful labels as "post-1980" (*balinghou*) and "post-1990" (*jiulinghou*) that tend to focus on collective, generational characteristics' (Kan, 2013: 67). Nicknames such

as the *fuerdai* (the rich second generation), the 'me-generation' (Elegant, 2007) and more recently the 'lost generation' (Kan, 2013) are used across both academic literature and in the media to refer to Chinese youth and leave little room to explore the diversity of youth experiences. In an introduction to Chinese college students, Liu, J. (2006) asserts that 'some young Chinese people establish their grand life aspirations during their stay in college, while others get lost forever' (Liu, J., 2006, in Xi, Sun and Xiao, 2006: 145). There is very little academic research on how Chinese students experience life in their generation, how they navigate the various pressures of their educational trajectories and employment challenges. Increasing student involvement in causes such as environmentalism hints at a value set incompatible with the spoiled, egotistical 'me-generation' that they are so frequently condemned to be.

Schucher's (2014) analysis of recent governmental anxiety over growing graduate unemployment in China suggests the state fears that unemployment will breed unrest and rebellion. He considers low job prospects to be correlated with the eruption of revolution, making the current situation in China a 'ticking time bomb' for the government (Schucher, 2014). A particularly hot topic in the last few years has been the possibility of what has been termed a Jasmine Revolution, modelled on the uprisings in Egypt. In their work on the relation between revolution and demography, Munro and Zeisberger (2011), however, suggest that the outbreak of revolution is related to population ratios. They analyse the 1989 Tiananmen protests and relate these back to population growth in the foregoing years. They suggest that when the youth population grows at approximately 50% over a 15-year period and the ratio of youth to 30–44 year olds exceeds 1.3, the potential for revolution is highest. According to this quantitative assessment they conclude that 'China's Jasmine Revolution will grow into little more than an aromatherapy session' (Munro and Zeisberger, 2011: 3). In either of those scenarios, prevailing attitudes among young people towards government and

society remain at the centre of revolutionary eruptions and it is with this in mind that paper two and three explore Chinese students' experience of university and environmental activism. The combined pressure of leaving home, having to succeed academically and shrinking employment options makes time at university an increasingly challenging experience for Chinese youth.

Space

Power relationships are reflected and reinforced but also challenged by spatial dynamics. In paper three I trace how the experience of university plays out in students' life trajectories and how this process is spatially structured. I touch on questions of power inherent in spatial relationships and discussions in youth studies about the nature of youth versus adulthood, transition paradigms and alternative theoretical models offered to analyse life trajectories. I argue that spatial dynamics play a central factor in youth experiences of SEA life and university in general. Space is one of the most fundamental concepts in human geography and, like its sister concept 'place', continuously contested and redefined. Since the early 1970s, scholars such as Lefebvre (1991 [1974]) were particularly concerned with the production of space under capitalism, that is, the relationship between space and power and the social construction of space. Tuan (1974) employed a similar approach to explaining why there are differences in the social construction of space between cultures and societies. In subsequent decades, research on space proliferated. In the late 1980s, Harvey (1989) first coined the term 'time-space compression' to theorise the alteration of the meaning and impact of space under conditions of technological change, modes of transportation and economic production. Scholars such as Harvey (1989), Massey (2005), Thrift and May (2001) argued for a reconfiguration of our approach to space and time that would 'overcome (…) the very formulation of space/time in terms of this kind of dichotomy (…) [and recognise instead] that

space and time are inextricably interwoven' (Massey, 1994: 260f., cited in May and Thrift, 2001). Massey (2005) explores the relationship between increased internationalisation and 'time-space compression' and, along with geographers such as McDowell and Sharp (1997), also brought attention to the connection between space and gender. Thrift (2012) highlights attempts made to theorise space in order to simplify the concept, arguing that such an endeavour may serve to reduce rather than increase our understanding of the processes at work and suggests that a multitude of approaches are more likely to produce new insights than a simplification of definitional boundaries could. Harvey (2004) similarly argues for a diversity of approaches to the study of space and its grip on this world, whereby the 'relational' approach may be the most helpful in investigating contemporary socio-political processes (Harvey, 2004). In an attempt to provide a theoretical framework that captures a wide array of definitional and practical approaches to the study and understanding of space, he combines his own tripartite model of space (absolute, relative and relational space) with Lefebvre's (experienced, conceptualised and lived) space (Lefebvre, 1991, [1974]). By virtue of creating a formal structure of this kind, however, he suggests also that such a matrix is limited in explanatory power, if not 'defective' (Harvey, 2004: 10). Space, for the purpose of this dissertation, is defined as 'relational' (Harvey, 2004; Massey, 2005). This idea aims to capture 'space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions' (Massey, 2005: 166) or, as Thrift (2012) puts it, 'space as undergoing continual construction exactly through the agency of things encountering each other in more or less organised circulations' (Thrift, 2012: 166). In the second paper of this dissertation I show that 'relational space' is also relevant to our understanding of people's response to polluted environment.

Environmentalism and the case of China

This research project is also concerned with exploring the nature of youth environmentalism in Beijing and the role of environmental NGOs in shaping the country's environmental movement. Having explored the political restrictions on activism this dissertation also explores how young people experience pollution and how students' formulate their environmental critique and action. Here I discuss how the Chinese case compares to the development of environmentalism in other parts of the world and how extant research can help us understand the motivations and potential inherent in student environmental associations and environmental education NGOs. For the sake of this project, I employ a broad definition of environmentalism, defined as 'the propensity to take actions with pro-environmental intent' (Stern, 2000: 411).

Works on the history of environmentalism, such as Guha (2000) and Armiero and Sedrez (2014) identify various different periods and types of environmentalism such as 'the wilderness idea' (Guha, 2000), 'the environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier, 2002) and the 'environmental justice movement' (Bullard and Johnson, 2000) to name but a few. Such terms have emerged from research that evidences the diverse forms that environmentalism and environmental movements take across the continents and reflect also the development of this phenomenon over time. Most scholars in the United States and Europe consider that the mid to end 19th century witnessed the 'first wave' of environmentalism, a response to industrialisation that subsided with the onset of the First World War (Pak, 2011; Guha, 2000). During this period, the 'wilderness idea', described by Guha (2000), emerged as a response to wildlife habitat destruction through industrialisation that led to the construction of national parks and first nature conservation efforts. The second, and arguably better-known, wave began in the 1960s, when Rachel Carson's hugely influential book on pesticide pollution

‘Silent Spring’ (Carson, 1962) was published, alerting the public to the dangers of pesticide pollution in animal farming and agriculture. Carson’s message alarmed environmentalists to the necessity to move beyond the conservation of specific areas in their quest for the protection of the environment.

Scholarship on environmentalism therefore, does not only concern itself with the effect of human behaviour on the natural world and vice versa but includes issues of politics, justice and economics. In the United States and European countries, environmentalism has turned from a popular movement into a potent political force, guiding national policies on issues as diverse as conservation, energy, urban development, housing and transportation. In the U.S., environmentalism also developed to include issues of racism and marginalisation. In response to waste dumping in predominantly black neighbourhoods in Warren County, North Carolina, for instance, the environmental justice movement was born (Bullard and Johnson, 2000). Definitions of the term ‘environmental justice’ vary greatly across literature and remain a subject of debate amongst scholars (Walker, 2012; Bullard and Johnson, 2000). Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the term as well as the movement has its origins in the 1982 protests of Warren County, where a group of African-American civil rights activists organised to stop the dumping of hazardous waste in their communities, claiming that they were being subjected to environmental racism.

Since the 1960s, environmentalism in the West has developed into a popular and political force, shaping national and international societal norms, laws and politics. Recently, the widespread adoption of environmentalist values in German and Swiss societies for instance as well as the political power of their green parties made headlines in 2011 when both countries ordered a phase-out of their nuclear energy programmes in response to the Fukushima reactor disaster in Japan. Scholars agree that the practices and processes associated with

environmentalism are constantly changing and adapting to novel local and global developments (Armiero and Sedrez, 2014; Guha, 2000). Literature concerned with identifying how current socio-political processes influence environmentalism in different countries aims to capture such diversity by linking environmentalism to constructs such as citizenship and identity. Here we come across terms such as for instance 'place-protective action' (Devine-Wright, 2009), 'environmental citizenship' (Dobson and Bell, 2006), 'ecological citizenship' (Jagers, Martinsson and Matti, 2014), 'green identity' (Horton, 2003), 'pro-environmental behaviour' (Steg and Vlek, 2009) and various others. This project uses Stern's (2002) broad definition to allow for an inclusion of activist campaign-type environmentalism as well as everyday behavioural norms in my analysis of Chinese youth environmentalism (Stern defines environmentalism: 'as the propensity to take actions with pro-environmental intent' (Stern, 2000: 411).

There were and are also vast differences in the state of the environment and the environmental movement in the global North and the global South. Whereas environmentalism in the West has often been depicted as a post-materialistic phenomenon that only developed after materialist needs were met, the term 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martinez-Alier, 2002) aims to capture environmentalism in poorer, Southern countries. In places where the environment remains a source of income and livelihood, citizens consider it a valuable resource and aim to protect it for these reasons. Despite such vast regional differences in environmental issues and the 'discovery' of climate change in the 1980s, policymakers have increasingly had to cooperate with other countries to solve environmental problems. Through the work of activists and scientists, global issues such as climate change, garbage flows and ozone layer depletion have come to the attention of the general public and policymakers. This has led to various attempts by international policymakers to draw up a set of universally accepted environmental norms and targets agreed upon at international summits, such as the

2009 Copenhagen and the 2015 Paris United Nations Climate Change Conferences. In light of globalised environmental problems and the necessity for environmental policies that transcend the needs of specific localities, environmentalism and various subgroups of the environmental movement have recently been subjected to renewed academic scrutiny.

Despite widespread criticism that international agreements and conferences are ineffective (Biermann, 2013), scholars such as Falkner (2012) for instance have argued that they signal the emergence of a 'global environmentalism'. He states that, though disappointing in outcome, such international congregations signal that 'over the last century, the ideas and values of global environmentalism have slowly but steadily moved from the margins towards the centre of the international agenda' (Falkner, 2012: 504f). Other scholars suggest however, that environmentalism as it is lived and taught in countries such as the U.S. for instance is not equipped to deal with contemporary environmental problems as it continues to focus on conservation and ecotourism rather than issues such as climate change and sustainable consumption (Smith, 2001; Peterson del Mar, 2012). In his work on environmentalism in Western countries Peterson del Mar (2012) concludes that 'loving nature and pushing the planet to the brink of catastrophe have been, more often than not, compatible' (Peterson del Mar, 2012: 98).

The environmental movement has also been considered to have become co-opted by governments and corporations. Issues of accountability, effectiveness and governance of NGOs have become the focus of this particular debate both in the realm of ENGOs and development NGOs (Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin. 2008; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Jepson, 2005). Beginning with a 1987 World Development brief entitled 'Development Alternatives: The Challenge of NGOs', academic debate on NGOs and ENGOs focused on assessing whether they provide any real alternatives to the established governmental and economical

order (see for instance: Lewis and Wallace, 2000; Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin, 2008; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007). Bryant (2009) traces the development of ENGO positionality, agenda and organisational structure as well as the proliferation of ENGO research in recent years. He suggests that by virtue of no longer being the 'guardians of the wild' (Bryant, 2009: 1540) that they used to be, the era of ENGOs may soon be coming to a close as they are unable to reach a new, young audience. Kellow (2000) also criticises ENGOs and their role in transnational environmental challenges in particular. He suggests that due to their increased embeddedness in international institutions, ENGOs 'cannot escape the web of national and regional interests' (Kellow, 2000: 1). Mason (2004) raises similar concerns about transnational ENGOs which are actively involved in shaping goals and practices of the WTO, suggesting issues with accountability and a global ENGO North-South divide in interests and agendas. He also contends, however, that recent efforts by ENGOs signal an understanding for the need to appeal to developing countries in order to reach broad support for their campaign efforts. Focusing on ENGO engagement in fishing practices, Wright (2000) also lauds their ability to insert themselves in policy processes and considers this crucial to their successes in changing policies and legislation. The debates surrounding ENGO positionality and the political salience of environmental movements are particularly relevant to the Chinese case, where a growing environmental crisis has led to the emergence of environmental protests and myriad forms of ENGOs and environmental activism.

China's environmental crisis and environmental NGOs

Since China's economic reform in the 1980s and subsequent years of unprecedented economic growth, the country's environment has come to suffer from similar issues of air, water and soil pollution, resource depletion, soil erosion, wildlife habitat destruction and

public health concerns that the West had to tackle after industrialisation (Economy, 2012; Liu and Diamond, 2005; Albert and Xu, 2016).

Elizabeth Economy's landmark study of China's environment, 'The River Runs Black' (Economy, 2004), highlights the environmental cost of uncontrolled and unbridled economic progress and warns of an enfolding environmental crisis that, if not prioritised by the central government, will endanger both economic growth and social stability. Not unlike inequalities in the economic realm, China's western regions are increasingly more affected by environmental problems than its more prosperous counterparts in the eastern and southern coastal regions. Across China, economic consequences of environmental pollution have already taken their toll on economic development and production, with air and water pollution limiting crop growth, water scarcity necessitating factory shut-downs and pollution-related health issues rendering employees unable to work (Economy, 2004). Public health concerns are among the most pressing issues related to environmental pollution, particularly in relation to respiratory diseases and various forms of cancer induced by air and water pollution (Economy, 2004). According to the World Bank (cited in Economy, 2004), an estimated 300,000 people die from air pollution per annum and in some of the most polluted cities, breathing in for children is the equivalent of smoking 2 packs of cigarettes per day (for more details see Economy, 2004, 84f). One of the most worrying phenomena associated with pollution in the poorer rural areas are the so called 'cancer villages', known as such for their pollution-induced sky rocketing numbers of various cancers, which further intensify the rural–urban inequities (Shapiro, 2012; Lora-Wainwright, 2013). Liu's (2010) recent study of Chinese cancer villages cites an approximate number of 459 reported in Chinese media and reveals that the 'label "cancer village" would turn away potential investors, tourists, friends, and spouses. The cancer-village phenomenon is likely to be more prevalent than has been previously reported' (Liu, 2010: 10). Cancer has become the leading cause of death in cities

(25% of total death rate) and the second biggest cause of death in rural areas (21% of total death rate) (Watts, 2008).

Intimately related to concerns over public health are issues of food safety and security. Controversies such as poisoned milk scandal in 2008, for instance, led to national and international outcries and have rapidly decreased social trust in government agencies. Furthermore, environmental degradation of water sources and soil critically reduce China's agrarian production and threaten its food supply. Whilst arable land and production are significantly diminishing, the country's food consumption per capita has increased manifold (for details on China's energy and food crisis see Smil, 2004). These domestic grievances are exacerbated by international concerns over China's CO_2 emissions, which surpassed those of the United States in 2007 (Liang, 2010). Despite its continued classification as a developing country, China can no longer ignore international climate change agreements and associated caps on emissions and has had to balance such demands with the need for continued economic growth at home (Liang, 2010).

Earlier in 2015, China's President Xi publicly pledged to protect the environment and declared: '*we are going to punish, with an iron hand, any violators who destroy ecology or environment, with no exceptions*' (Bloomberg Website, 2015 citing Xinhua News Agency).
The Chinese government, however, is not only concerned about the economic cost of both environmental degradation and pollution-related health issues but public protests against these issues are also posing a direct challenge to the CCP's regime legitimacy. In response to environmental degradation and pollution, parts of the Chinese population, both urban and rural, have begun to protest against environmental pollution and deterioration. The scale and form of protests vary across the country, ranging from street demonstrations against the building of chemical plants in a specific locality to nationwide campaigns against issues such

as dam building. Jiangsu's activist Wu Lihong for instance alerted national and international media to the commercially induced pollution of Lake Tai and was subsequently arrested by local officials (Shapiro, 2012). Large scale anti-incinerator protests have grown out of China's growing waste-management problems and have resulted, at times, in the halting or even abandonment of plans to build waste incinerators (Lang and Xu, 2013). Although the majority of protests tend to be clustered around localised Nimby (not-in-my-back-yard) issues, major infrastructure projects such as the dam-building plans on the Nu River have led to nationwide campaigns and necessitated the direct involvement of central government. This development has led the government to step up its efforts to combat environmental degradation resulting in an ever-increasing set of environmental laws and policies. Implementing these laws and policies, however, often due to their largely negative short-term effect on local fiscal revenues, is met with resistance by both local governments and companies. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences only about 10% of environmental laws in China are actually implemented at the local level (Gu, 2005).

This 'implementation gap' has led the central government to experiment with allowing environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) and environmental activists to actively and publicly engage in environmental protection campaigns (Ho, 2001). As a result, numerous environmental non-governmental organisations were established all across the country focusing on public environmental education, environmental litigation, environmental impact assessment and an array of specialised environmental concerns such as water pollution, reforestation and animal protection. This direct, albeit careful, encouragement of 'public participation' has led to a surge in academic interest in the field of Chinese environmentalism. Mostly, research questions are focused on the movement's impact on civil society development and its potential for acting as a site and agent for democratic change. Due to ENGOs' increased insertion into political networks, their impact on policy and

legislation has arguably increased since their grassroots days (Yang, 2005). Yet, initial enthusiasm in the scholarly community about the role of non-state actors, and ENGOs in particular, might play in strengthening civil society and democratic processes has given way to a more cautious reflection of ENGO activism (Schwartz, 2004, Ho and Edmonds, 2007). Terms such as 'embedded activism' (Ho and Edmonds, 2007) and 'conformist rebels' (Zhang and Barr, 2013) aim to capture the curious role of Chinese ENGOs which are dependent both on governmental goodwill and courting of officials and yet frequently able to increase space for civic participation in politics, guide governmental policy and legislation and increase governmental accountability. That the government has allowed for any political space to open at all is born of the sheer overwhelming magnitude of environmental problems and growing public outrage over the resultant pollution (Schwartz, 2004). By channelling dissenting voices through legal political pathways the government aims to depoliticise them but is unable to forestall the emergence of an increasingly rights-based discourse about public participation (Johnson, 2014). Yang and Calhoun (2007) argue that ENGOs also play a central role in increasing public discourse about environmental subjects. This 'greenspeak', they argue, is crucial to strengthening civil society and allows citizens to veil government criticism in environmental rhetoric (Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

Environmental NGOs have also been at the forefront of educational reforms to include environmental education in school curricula (Hong, Guo and Marinova, 2006; Economy, 2004). Economy (2004) stresses the importance of the next generation of environmentalists, who will determine the course of China's environment in their future roles as activists, teachers, cadres and so forth. There is, however, very little research on the strategies employed by ENGOs who are targeting this next generation. In order to explore how environmentalism will develop further in China it is vital to understand how environmental education NGOs aim to educate the country's youth. In paper four, I thus address questions of

ENGO strategy and effectiveness in implementing their environmental education mission. I focus on those ENGOs whose primary focus is the environmental education of young people to explore what values and mores ENGOs aim to instil in the coming generation of budding environmentalists. I highlight both their continued reliance on government-sanctioned political space and discourse as well their instrumentalisation of governmental agendas in their quest to place environmentalism firmly into educational and governmental programmes. I argue that their strategies call for a new research paradigm when assessing NGO work that moves away from normative assumptions about the role NGO should play in shaping politics and society.

Place based environmentalism, environmental health and the case of China

Up until the 1960s, the conceptualisation of 'place' was defined by the traditions of regional geography and used essentially as synonymous to 'location', employed mainly to describe 'where' an area was located on the earth's surface. This static approach to 'place' was challenged by geographers such as Relph in 1976 in 'Place and Placelessness' and Tuan in 'Topophilia' (1974) who sought to distinguish the term from related concepts such as region and location. Relph (1976) for instance sought to outline the relationship between 'place' and 'space', which he considered to be dialectically structuring the human environmental experience. Rather than being relegated to represent 'locations', then, places, in this humanistic tradition were 'seen as universal and transhistorical parts of the human condition. It was not so much places (in the world) that interested the humanists but 'place' as an idea, concept and way of being-in-the-world' (Cresswell, 2004: 20). The reinvigoration of interest in the conceptualisation of place was further developed in the late 1980s and 1990s when scholars such as Agnew (1987), Harvey (1989) and Cresswell (1996) addressed issues of power and politics inherent to the construction and conceptualisation of 'place'. Cresswell

(1996) considers how 'place' shapes social norms and mores in a way that classifies acts that are 'out of place' as transgressions. He outlines this point based on the experience of graffiti artists in New York, peace campers and new age travellers in Britain. Agnew's (1987) 'Place and Politics' seeks to define 'place' as a geographic concept in such a way as to reflect the multiple meanings of the term. Agnew refers to place as: 'location (physical location, coordinates on a map), locale (material setting of social relations), and sense of place (peoples' subjective and emotional attachment to a place)'. His definition is lauded by Cresswell (2004) as an account of place that not only captures the diversity inherent in the concept but also separates it usefully from sister concepts such as space and landscape (Cresswell, 2004: 8).

The intrinsic link between people's behavioural norms and attitudes and their relationship to 'place' has also become a focus of enquiry in scholarship on environmentalism. The link between specific places and the development of environmentalism has been discussed for instance by scholars of environmental psychology who focus their analysis on environmental behaviour in relation to place attachment and/or identity. This has led to works such as a recent special issue in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2010) on the relationship between identity, place and environmental behaviour. Here scholars discuss for instance the role of place attachment, connectedness to nature and conservation behaviour (Gosling and Williams), the relation between large-scale renewable energy projects and the disruption of place attachment (Devine-Wright and Howes) and the role of place identity and place attachment in breaking environmental protection laws (Hernandez et al.). In order to define what scholars mean when they talk about how humans relate to place, and what scale of place they are referring to, words such as 'place identity', 'place attachment' (Scannell and Gifford) or 'sense of place' (Lim and Barton) have been employed to capture the relationship between identity and place.

Other discussions of place and environmentalism have focused on the effect 'place based' environmentalism has had on the environmentalist agenda and how this relates to challenges created through international environmental problems (Smith, 2001). Smith's study (2001) of the American environmental movement as well as Peterson del Mar's (2012) history of environmentalism suggest that an environmentalist agenda that is aimed at the protection of wilderness areas, national parks or forests prevents environmental critique and action that is equipped to deal with contemporary environmental issues such as waste management, global warming and unsustainable consumption. Armiero and Sedrez (2014) echo this concern by highlighting that modern environmentalism can no longer concern itself with localised issues alone since environmental issues are no longer contained within certain spatial boundaries, nor can one place be environmentally safe when another is not. Smith (2001) states that 80% of the American population consider themselves environmentalists and yet the United States has made little progress in developing an effective response to the threat of global warming.

According to a recent report by the Dutch research agency 'Motivaction' approximately 64% of Chinese also identify themselves as environmentalists (Nicolaou, 2014). Many popular environmental protests have been related to health concerns over environmental pollutants such as protests against chemical plants in Xiamen (anti-PX protests), the building of waster incinerators in Panyu (Huang and Yip, 2012), water pollution through commercial wastewater discharge and anti-dam building protests (Jing, 2003). Yet most of these protests remain localised and display a Nimby character, which has classically been considered ineffective in addressing large-scale problems of environmental governance. Additionally, political surveillance severely restricts the scale of ENGO action (Schwartz, 2004). Economy (2007) explains that the government has come to accept ENGOs if they function as 'environmental watchdog at the local level' (Economy, 2007: 10), but will not tolerate any large-scale campaigns or critique directed at the government. Stalley and Yang (2006) dismiss ENGOs' ability to turn localised protests into an environmental movement and suggest that

> most of the [NGO] protests have been spontaneous responses to a local policy or a particular polluting factory. NGO-led campaigns have had varying degrees of success and have undoubtedly inspired many across China, but they have not developed into a movement that has survived and broadened beyond the campaign's immediate goal. (Stalley and Yang, 2006: 336)

This indicates that the emergence of environmentalism in China may already suffer from the shortcomings of place based environmentalism that is criticised by scholars of environmental movements in other countries. However, recent scholarship on both rural and urban China has emphasised that the emergence of place based environmentalism has been successful in improving channels for public participation and governance (Johnson, 2010; Lang and Xu, 2012). Lora-Wainwright (2017) in particular cautions against a simplistic analysis of place based environmental critique and action and outlines instead the myriad ways in which place and environmental issues combine to shape citizens' and activists' understanding of environmental threats and effective environmental action. Part of this study therefore focuses on exploring how students' emphasis of the protection of the campus environment shapes their understanding of environmental issues. It debates how this 'place based' environmentalism translates into environmental critique and action and takes forward extant theories on place based environmental action through the Chinese case.

Debates surrounding environmental health and peoples response to polluted environment are addressed in paper two where I trace recent developments in literature on occupational and environmental health and consider students' response to Beijing's air pollution. I combine these debates with the theoretical underpinnings of relational space to explain how youth come to embed air pollution in their narrative of Beijing as a place of financial opportunity and I show how 'polluted space' comes to be perceived as 'developed space'. I add to the discussion on citizen's response to pollution by employing Massey's (2005) notion of

'relational space' as a further crucial tool to explore how people come to accept pollution hazards despite knowledge and bodily evidence of their adverse effects on health.

Methodology: methods, challenges and fieldwork dilemmas

As this dissertation is presented in form of four individual papers, methodology sections in the papers are relatively short. I have included an in-depth discussion of my methodology and fieldwork experience in this framing document:

Research design

This study was designed as a qualitative research project based primarily on interviews and complemented by ethnographic methods, content analysis of SEA and ENGO publications and related news items, pictorial evidence and survey results provided by the Jane Goodall Institute China. Qualitative mixed method approaches to research have been increasingly popular in human geography since the 1970s when humanistic and feminist geographers argued for the value of qualitative approaches to geographical enquiry (Hay, 2005). Since then the use of a broad scope of qualitative research methods has become commonplace in geographic scholarship, despite criticism from proponents of quantitative, scientific approaches (De Lyser et al., 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as 'an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 10).

The environmental movement itself and its main proponents such as ENGOs are a relatively recent phenomenon in China, and environmentalists' role in the socio-political process remains unclear (Ho, 2006; Yang, 2005; Sun and Zhao, 2008). Since the founding of China's first ENGO in 1985 ('Friends of Nature') this area of research has produced a range of new studies but hardly any have been focused on students and young people. Previous survey-based accounts such as Stalley and Yang's (2006) and Wong's (2003) evaluation of survey data on student environmentalism in Beijing have come to almost directly opposite conclusions about the underlying motivations and possible future development of this phenomenon, suggesting the need for a more in-depth exploration of students' value systems. Due to contradictions between previous studies on student environmentalism, qualitative insight into everyday processes and opinions appeared a necessary and useful next step in this field of enquiry. I therefore chose a qualitative in-depth research design to collect data about the processes and opinions underlying young people's involvement in the Chinese environmental movement with a focus on Beijing students engaged in SEAs or ENGO campaigning.

An approach that allowed triangulation of data and return visits over a longer period of time was particularly suited to the collection of data required for my research questions for a number of reasons. My research was aimed at analysing what type of environmental norms and behaviours guided students' environmental campaigning and what processes and experiences had shaped these opinions and action repertoires. I also wished to explore whether SEA or ENGO affiliation impacted young people's experience of university and youth, and how it shaped their political outlook. I therefore chose to focus on interviewing and complement this with ethnographic methods such as participant observation and establishing long-term relationships with key informants across Beijing to explore underlying norms and behavioural attitudes as well as collecting long-term data on students' experience

of SEA life and university. I triangulated students' views and experiences with interviews with ENGO professionals, university staff and environmental journalists.

I prioritised interviews over observation to be able to collect data on a broad set of individual reasons for developing an interest in the environment. An approach that solely relied on interviewing, however, also risked masking differences between reported and actual behavioural patterns so I chose to complement interviewing with participant observation to allow me to triangulate interview responses with data on observed behaviour. Establishing long-term relationships with key informants and including participant observation in the research design was crucial also to my interest in everyday forms of agency and activism. Interviews also did not lend themselves to gaining a detailed picture of students' campaign efforts and their experience of campus life. My repeat visits over a longer period of time allowed me to map how people's mores and actions changed over time and produced a detailed picture of the SEA community as well as their evolving relationship with ENGOs. Hoggart, Lees and Davies state that 'research design is a process rather than an event' (Hoggart, Lees and Davies, 2002: 40). Most scholars of human geography and related disciplines share this view and although research for this project was prepared over a period of six months, research participants and methods like interviewing techniques did indeed change after my pilot trip in December 2012. In the following sections, I discuss how the research design developed from a singular field side with a single group of research participants into an approach that included multiple sites and multiple groups of research participants. I also reflect on methods related to participant observation, field notes and interviews and discuss issues of positionality, ethics and reciprocity, which shaped both methods and subsequent data analysis.

Language acquisition

I began studying Mandarin at the age of 18 when I first moved to Beijing for a period of 11 months from 2006 to 2007. I learned the language from scratch at Beijing Language and Culture University and later at a private language school in the southern part of the university district of Haidian. Living with a Chinese family for the first three months of my stay I gained insights into Chinese culture that proved extremely valuable in establishing rapport with my informants later on. It also gave me the chance to familiarise myself with the city and the university district in particular, both of which proved very helpful when setting myself up in the field as a researcher a few years later. I continued studying Chinese language and culture during my undergraduate years at the University of Nottingham. During my undergraduate studies in 2008 and 2009 at the University of Nottingham Ningbo, in Zhejiang Province China, I had first-hand experience of living on a Chinese university campus. This period was invaluable to my language studies and it provided me with first-hand experiences of campus student groups in the environmental realm as some of my Chinese peers were involved in a range of sustainability projects as part of their commitment to the student run organisation SIFE (students in free enterprise).

The nature of my research, and its focus on social and political processes in particular, necessitated both careful selections of my research and interview questions as well as language levels that could transcend language barriers between me and research participants. My language skills were essential to establishing rapport with my informants. Upon embarking on my DPhil I tested out and further improved my Mandarin interviewing skills with Mandarin teachers and students but I also decided to conduct a pilot project in December 2012, when I interviewed a number of environmental journalists and ENGO workers to ensure that my language abilities satisfied the requirements of all aspects of my fieldwork

design. I continued improving my language skills over the course of my fieldwork and found that I was fluent in Mandarin Chinese in interviews. However, when on occasion I missed nuances relating to humour or dialects I asked participants to explain what was meant. Although most informants spoke basic English, very few of them would have been fluent enough to speak to me in English which would have necessitated help from interpreters. Recruiting the help of a translator would have ensured that in every interview I would have immediately understood even rare idioms or slang language but I wished to avoid the use of interpreters as this may have added layers of meanings, biases and interpretation (Freeman, 1983 cited in Fontana and Frey, 2008: 131). Instead, I relied on recording interviews I conducted in the first four months of fieldwork and recorded all interviews with ENGO members. Inevitably, in larger group settings and focus groups, I likely missed out on some of the things that were said, especially when I was unable to record with an audio recorder.

My knowledge of Mandarin allowed me to 'hang out' with students and ENGO members and get to know them outside interview situations, allowing me to gain a significantly deeper and more nuanced picture of their attitudes, behavioural norms and life histories than could have been accessed through surveys. Throughout my research I consulted Mandarin teachers to aid me in my translations of written material as well as audio recordings of interviews to ensure a consistently high level of translation and analysis. Just like interpreters add layers of meaning, my own translation and interpretations of interviews other data influenced my data analysis, a bias that I wished to reduce as much as I possibly could. Upon my return to Europe I therefore continued to enlist the help of Mandarin speakers to translate some of my later recordings to ensure I had captured all facets and possible interpretations of recorded responses.

Timeline

I spent several months in the field in the form of return visits over the period of a year to collect the data necessary for my project. I wanted to collect more data than interviewing or surveying would yield as I was and remain convinced that given the context and subject of my research such methods would only go so far in getting me the depths of insights and answers that I was looking for. I wanted to ensure that my research would go beyond standardised survey and structured interviews to include ethnographic methods that would allow for detailed data on everyday social and political processes. Both interview-based and survey-based accounts of student environmentalism had effectively yielded very different and thereby inconclusive results in projects by other researchers.[4] I knew adding ethnographic elements to my fieldwork methods would take more time than purely interview or survey-based evaluation but due to my already extant language abilities and prior long-term stays in Beijing and the South of China I was deeply aware of the cultural and historical fabric of China and Beijing in particular. This allowed me to quickly establish access to and rapport with research participants. I therefore decided to limit the number of interviewees to 50 (participant observation included many other students that would attend SEA and ENGO events) and spend as much time as possible, outside the interviewing process, attending SEA or ENGO events and simply 'hanging out' with students and ENGO workers on campus or in cafes and restaurants. Interview participants were selected based first on their affiliation with the SEAs and ENGOs I had chosen to study. I made sure my selection included all student year groups and both heads and lower level employees of ENGOs. This process was aided by my relationship with key informants who introduced me to students and ENGO members based on the selection criteria I had discussed with them. Collecting data on multiple field

[4] See for instance Stalley and Yang's (2006) evaluation of survey data on student environmentalism in Beijing as opposed to Wong's (2003), Lu's (2003) and Pulver's (2008) analyses of students in environmental associations and ENGOs.

sites and various groups of people ensured that the research would reflect a multitude of views and action repertoires.

I chose my fieldwork months based on insights I had gained during my pilot trip in December 2012. During my conversations with environmental journalists and former SEA members it became clear that SEA group dynamics and levels of commitment to the SEA were dependent on the shift in responsibilities and the member recruitment process at the beginning of each academic year (September/October). Since I wanted to investigate, amongst other things, the effect of group membership and power dynamics within the groups I therefore chose to conduct my first trip from March to the beginning of August 2013 and then another two months in October and November 2013. I chose these particular dates because it allowed me to see the transition from first year to second year, second year to third year and so forth and see how responsibilities within the SEAs shifted and new power structures and hierarchies might emerge. Also, to understand how university life was experienced by these young people, I wanted to meet first year students upon their entry into university and see whether there was a discernible change in second and third year students as their university career progressed.

Due to modern communication devices it took a lot longer than I had anticipated such that I felt I was no longer collecting data. I spent hours on email, Skype and Weixin (Chinese mobile app akin to Western equivalents such as WhatsApp and Messenger) with research participants that had become my friends, as well as those Chinese friends that were not directly part of my research but had played invaluable parts in it through conversations and feedback throughout this time. Half a year after my return from the field I decided not to discuss my work and subjects closely related to it to allow me to finally start writing and limit the collection of new insights.

Multiple sites within the field

The research was originally planned to involve one physically-bounded space where I would live on a university campus in Beijing and focus on one particular student environmental association, relying on participant observation, 'hanging out', conducting structured and semi-structured interviews and informally chatting. This method, conventionally, has involved the idea of a relatively long-term stay in one particular field site that 'was understood (…) to be the container of a particular set of social relations, particular set of social relations, which could be studied and possibly compared with the contents of other containers elsewhere (Falzon, 2009: 1). This research design was challenged when I went on my fieldtrip in December 2012 and met with a range of environmental journalists, ENGO members and students. Although the trip proved invaluable for establishing connections with relevant research participants before my extended fieldwork periods the following year, my informants warned me that I would likely be monitored heavily by the Communist Youth League (CYL) and further campus authorities if I tried to live on campus, potentially jeopardising my ability to gain any real insights into the opinions and strategies embedded in student environmentalism. Stories of CYL scrutiny of student groups had mounted in the months leading up to my fieldwork, ranging from standard stories of forbidding registrations to withholding funds and bordering on more open sabotage such as the turning off of electricity during student group events (Kaiman, 2012). I had heard of other researchers being presented with the same problem not only in terms of being monitored during interviews and participant observation but also email accounts being hacked and visas withdrawn. Additionally, since CYL presence varied across campus and some SEAs were significantly larger and more active than others, I was encouraged to study multiple student groups and ENGOS.

The methodological implications of this were manifold. By virtue of living outside campus, my field site was no longer as focused and spatially-bound as I had anticipated. Classically, the spatial boundaries of ethnographic research have been very clearly defined and this was a rule I had originally planned on following. Since the late 20thcentury and in contemporary social science there exists the idea, however, that research in classical bounded field sites may be outmoded. Scholars have brought forward the idea of multi-sited or transnational ethnographies. Multi-sited ethnography is meant to explore and outline the interconnectedness of a field site with the outside to capture the effect of globalisation on contemporary society. 'In terms of method, multi-sited ethnography involves a spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographers moves–actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually, by means of techniques of juxtaposition of data' (Falzon, 2009: 2). In researching various SEAs and ENGOs across Beijing I arguably took a multi-sited approach; however, if transnational nature is a prerequisite for multi-sited fieldwork this does not apply to my research . The examples cited by a Falzon (2009) and some of his colleagues all involve research conducted across different nations.

However, whether or not a field is considered multi-sited is essentially dependent on a definition of the 'field' and the 'outside'. Since space is socially constructed or produced (Massey, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991 [1974]), producing a field site is a task dependent on the researcher's own understanding of the spatial boundaries of the social relations investigated. I would hesitate to adopt 'multi-sited ethnography' as a definition. Instead, I consider my approach to be one of multiple sites within the one, spatially-bounded field of Beijing. This interpretation has arisen from subsequent analysis of my data. Everything I observed was embedded in campus life but also intimately tied to the urban geography of Beijing and Beijing's role as China's capital, the centre of power and economic opportunity. I was living first in the centre of the city, where I felt I would be ideally situated to visit both SEAs and

ENGOs which were dispersed all across the city. However, after two months I realised travelling time significantly affected how much time I could spend with students, especially when it came to spontaneous meetings and last-minute notice of events. Consequently, I lived in between the Beijing Forestry University and Beijing Jiaotong University in the centre of the university district. This approach proved a good choice for the remainder of my fieldwork. I was never confronted with CYL scrutiny, or at least was not aware of any form of observation that was directed especially at my research or me by them or other authorities. I would spend my days alternating between attending SEA events, hanging out with individual SEA or NGO members and visiting NGOs and their events. Falzon notes 'spatial routing becomes a route to ethnographic knowledge' (Falzon, 2009: 9). I spent hours establishing an intimate knowledge of the spatiality of the field by walking to almost all meetings and events that could reasonably be reached on foot. In between meetings or during periods when research participants were not getting back to me I would often use the time to explore the city or university campuses on foot, or sit down, observe and take notes. As I knew Beijing to be more of a novel experience to many of the students than it was for me, I committed to writing details of what I saw, both of the urban structures, the people, nature, signs and maps across the city and how this compared to my experience of the Southern parts of China, for instance.

THE FIELD

China

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the most populous country in the world. According to China's most recent population census (conducted by Communiqué of the National Bureau of Statistics in 2010), the country's populace was an estimated 1,339,724,852 people. Due to

the introduction of the one-child policy in the early 1980s the country's demographic structure has been altered radically over the past three decades. In 2012, having reached its peak after 60 years of sustained growth, the ratio of people categorised as the 'working-age population' (15–59 years) began to decrease (Peng, 2015). Despite declining birth rates, the country's population continues to increase at approximately 0.5% each year (World Bank, n.d.)

The country covers an area of 9,596,960 square kilometres and is divided into 22 provinces, 5 autonomous regions and 2 special administrative zones. The country's geography and climatic conditions are as similarly diverse as those of the United States featuring, however, far less arable land and only a single seacoast (Naughton, 2007). Nevertheless, the mass of the country's populace used to rely largely on farming and resided in the countryside up until the end of the 20th century. Since the ushering in of Deng's economic modernisation programme, China changed from an agrarian to a rapidly industrialising and predominantly urban society, creating over 400 new cities and hundreds of millions of urban residents (Ren, 2013) The capital, Beijing, is one of the four largest cities, alongside neighbouring Tianjin, and Shanghai and Chongqing in the south. The official language is Mandarin or Standard Chinese (*putonghua*, which translates as 'common language'). There are various dialects of Mandarin which are still spoken across the country but Mandarin is the official spoken language in schools, institutes of higher learning, television and radio.

In 1978 after the death of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping took over as leader of the CCP and initiated decades of economic reform and growth, unprecedented in Chinese history. The country's gross domestic product grew at an average annual rate of 10% for nearly three decades (Naughton, 2007). This fast-paced development has lifted more than 500 million people out of poverty and firmly placed the country amongst the biggest economic and

political players of the 21st century (World Bank Online, 2015). Simultaneously, however, this rate of growth has created vast inequalities between the increasingly prosperous eastern coastal regions and the western provinces. This discrepancy, according to Dillon (2009), goes back far beyond economic expansion but has been exacerbated greatly since the initiation of Deng's 1978 reform programme. Despite its impressive economic development over the past thirty years, the World Bank continues to classify China as a developing country as its per capita income is a fraction of that of advanced countries and poverty reduction remains a core challenge (World Bank Online, 2015). Additionally, although absolute poverty has decreased, the income gap between rich and poor has increased significantly since the beginning of the reform period (Ren, 2013).

In 2013, the sixth generation of CCP leadership took over from former president Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. Currently presiding over CCP leadership are President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. Xi has already gained a reputation for bringing back 'strong man politics' (Zheng and Gore, 2015:1) and becoming the 'first among equals' (Buckley, 2014) after decades of consensus-based leadership from the Politburo. His crusade agains.t corruption in the party, anti-Western thought campaigns at universities and extensive efforts to renew a nationwide leadership cult around his personality has led some scholars to draw comparisons between him and Mao Zedong.[5]

Beijing

Since 1949, Beijing (北京: translates as 'Northern capital') is the capital of the People's Republic of China and governed as a municipality. As of 2013, when the bulk of research for

[5] For a recent discussion about this topic from four renowned China scholars see: http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/does-xi-jinping-represent-return-mao-era.

this dissertation was undertaken, the population of permanent residents reached 21.15 million (Xinhua News Agency, cited in the Global Times, 2014). Beijing Municipality lies in the north of the North China Plain, spans a total area of 16,410.54 square kilometres (city: 4,567 square kilometres) and borders Tianjin Municipality in the east and Hebei Province in the north, south and west (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2015).

The city is a major commercial hub for state-owned companies as well as multinationals and hosts the headquarters of the country's most important political and academic institutions (such as the National People's Congress held at the Great Hall of the People, the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party, the Central Government at Zhongnanhai, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). It hosted the 2008 Olympics, has recently been selected as the site of the 2022 Winter Olympics and has gained international media attention due to its infamously poor air quality.

Gaining access to and setting myself up in the city was made easier through my position as a visiting researcher at the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This affiliation allowed easy acquisition of my original visa as well as subsequent renewals. Navigating the city and transport links, finding a place to live and being able to independently carry out day-to-day necessities such as shopping or recharging electricity cards were processes with which I had already acquainted myself during my studies in the city in 2006, 2007 and a one-month visit in 2009. Despite this familiarity I remained overwhelmed by the excessive air pollution, which literally went 'off the charts' during my time there (Wong, 2013).

Beijing Haidian District

I started off living in the centre of the city but after a couple of months, most of my research - as well as my home - was Beijing's university district Haidian. This district lies in the north-western part of the city and is the second largest district in Beijing, after Chaoyang, the commercial district in the east. According to the Beijing Government, Haidian covers an area of 426 square kilometre, is home to 1.44 million people and famed for its high-tech industry and institutions of tertiary education which, numbering 80 institutes, account for 70% of such institutions in Beijing and 14.7% across the country (Beijing International, n.d.a; Beijing International, n.d. b). Beijing University and Tsinghua University, arguably the two most renowned Chinese universities, are located here as well as almost all universities whose students were part of my research (with the exception of some graduates of universities outside Beijing).

Beijing Forestry University and Beijing Jiaotong University

The Beijing Forestry University (commonly shortened to BFU or LinDa) and Beijing Jiaotong University (commonly shortened BJTU or JiaoDa) are both located in Beijing's Haidian district. They are part of the national key universities and colleges group, 'Project 211', aimed at raising research and teaching standards at 116 universities across China, chosen and overseen by the Ministry of Education. BFU focuses on forestry and environmental studies but also courses in subject areas such as IT, economic management, humanities and social sciences and foreign languages. BJTU is particularly renowned for its transportation, engineering, law and information and communications technology departments but also offers courses in subject areas such as economics, humanities and social sciences, architecture, art, and physical sciences. At the time of my research, the BFU SEA 'Green Finger' consisted of

approximately 100 registered total members and 40 active members (in positions of responsibility or frequent attendance). The BJTU SEA 'Green Family' consisted of approximately 100 registered members and 25 active members. These numbers varied throughout the year as some members joined or left or became more or less active in SEA life. SEA members outside these two universities attended Beijing Normal University, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing Renmin University, Beijing University and Beijing Agricultural University.

Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOs)

The Jane Goodall Institute's environmental education programme 'Roots and Shoots' (R&S) came to China in 1994 and the Jane Goodall Institute China was founded in 2000. The Jane Goodall Institute's mission is to '*empower individuals to take informed and compassionate action to improve the environment for all living things*' (JGI China website, 2015). The Beijing office is located at the Beijing City International School, on Baiziwan Ne Er Road in Chaoyang district. Since its establishment in China, over 600 R&S groups have been founded. These groups focus on environmental, humanitarian and animal protection activities, guided by either their own initiatives or those of teachers and R&S staff.[6]

The China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN) was founded in 2007 by seven different youth organisations that merged their resources. Six full-time and varying numbers of part-time staff and volunteers run their office in Beijing (located on Suzhou Street in Haidian district).

[6] For more details on their various activities and current environmental and animal protection campaigns visit: www.genyuya.org.cn/en.

Their stated mission is

> *to coordinate and provide services for organizations interested in promoting youth participation in civil society. Building on our domestic and international contacts we want to build a sustainable low carbon future. We want to inspire and guide young people to grasp the opportunities in China and tackle the challenges of climate change and the transition to a sustainable energy future. We support Chinese youth to become a new driving force to achieve global sustainable development*. (climatenetwork.org, n.d.).

Since its foundation, over 450 colleges and universities across China have participated in CYCAN activities (CYCAN website, n.d.). During research for this project there were 10 student interns involved in part-time work at the CYCAN office. The Green Student Forum (GSF) was founded in 1996 and aimed at creating a platform for students interested in various environmental protection initiatives. It has grown into a network of nearly 270 student environmental associations across China with the Beijing branch acting as headquarters (Pulver, 2009).

Participant observation, hanging out and access to group life

Madden (2010) highlights that 'being with people' in ethnographic research is never just 'being' in an ordinary way and that 'there is no point denying the instrumentality of successful ethnographic participation; it is targeted, favours certain forms of participation over others and is bounded by the question(s) that drive the research (Madden, 2010: 78). A somewhat different take on ethnographic methods is outlined by Agar (1996) who suggests that as the 'the informant's apprentice (…) the ethnographer surrenders the control of situations, questions, and samples, apprentices himself to group members, and learns how

they interpret their world' (Agar, 1996: 242). Agar's (1996) approach is not necessarily less instrumentalist but suggests a less tactical approach to 'being with people' than Madden (2010) who warns of 'aimless socio-cultural immersion' (Madden, 2010: 79) preventing researchers from answering the research questions. I found that neither theorisation was entirely reflective of my experience of participant observation and 'hanging out'. Although my approach to being with the research participants was initially very targeted this dynamic changed when students and ENGO staff got to know me better and started initiating contact and suggested events or meeting places. I was at once their 'apprentice' and also constantly aware of my research question and the nagging necessity to in some way 'control' our encounters in a way that would offer the insights into their work and attitudes that I was trying to collect. At the beginning, in March 2013, I contacted students, set up meetings with them at their universities and subsequently found out which SEA or ENGO meetings they were organising and/or attending so that I could include these meetings or interviews with ENGO members in my research. When I became more acquainted with my main informants at JiaoDa (Xuewen) and at LinDa (Xiaohui), they began to choose people who they thought I should meet and events which they deemed interesting. I also began to meet students on campus outside SEA and university life at cafes, shopping malls and restaurants. Since I wished to understand the dynamics of campus life, I chose to organise all interviews on the respective campuses and asked students to choose a place where we could meet. This proved helpful as it made me realise, for instance, how difficult it was for students to find a single place on the entire campus where they could have some privacy or quiet.

To ensure an understanding of diversity amongst students I chose to repeatedly interview students that, in the first instance, had expressed diverging views on SEA life. Additionally, however, the conscious selection of students on my part was also an effort to avoid what Flick (2007) describes as being 'captured' by the first person that took an interest in my work who

may well have been the ‘gatekeepers’ (Flick, 2007: 32) and, in this particular case, possibly members of the Communist Youth League who sought to monitor my work. I found myself caught between trying to avoid those students who seemed too forthcoming whilst also needing to gather information and not being able to wait until more reluctant participants made time for me. Additionally, I discerned an opposite type of danger when avoiding supposed ‘gatekeepers’ where I would consciously try to select students who seemed to diverge from mainstream views thereby creating another type of bias in my research. In an effort to balance both I chose for instance students like JiaoDa’s Xuewen who stressed the ‘Green Family’ over any other cause or extracurricular activity and aimed to balance this with JiaoDa students who were less committed (I found the opposite type of approach in Yingqi, for instance, who had nothing but scorn for student-run organisations). At LinDa I spent the bulk of my time with Xiaohui who seemed to find my interest in her and LinDa’s SEA somewhat annoying and whose friendship it took a while to gain but ‘becoming best buddies with just those people who seek to befriend is never a wise tactic in life, nor should it be in social research’ (Mills and Morton, 2013: 68). I also chose to interview the head of both SEAs, Zhaolü and Wenli, multiple times and included Pengjun from Renmin University who was at once highly critical and full of admiration for China. By collecting stories and observations on such widely differing opinions and attitudes I aimed to create an account of student environmentalism that was both diverse and balanced.

A limitation that I felt after a while was posed by my unsuccessful attempts to spend time with whole groups of SEA students outside SEA or ENGO events. Due to examination pressure and various other commitments it was already challenging to see SEA students individually but given their expressed interest in much of SEA life due to the friendly and supportive atmosphere I was hoping to see their interactions beyond this institutional platform. It proved rather difficult to engineer this, especially given that by organising it

myself I could no longer be certain as to whether I was participating in something that they would normally do. I gave up on this endeavour and chose instead to do three focus group interviews with students I had observed at SEA events to see how they interacted in such a scenario.

Playing the role of observer and participant at the same time was riddled with issues of ethics and positionality. It only rarely happened that I felt truly out of place and reminded of my position as an outsider to the extent that the distance between my research participants and me created barriers between us. On one such occasion I was attending the annual Jane Goodall Roots and Shoots summit. During one of the workshops the attending Chinese school and university students were introduced to three Roots and Shoots group profiles and activities, presented by two university students and one high school student. I was the only Western (or at least the only Western-looking) person in a room of about 50 people until an American woman walked in and explained that she would lead the workshop and started it off with 'fun' exercises. She spoke hardly any Mandarin and still decided to use a selection of random words such as 'fun–*haowan*' and 'right?–*dui ba*?' in her otherwise English introduction. I immediately began to feel embarrassed on her and my own behalf as the students around me began to giggle and look at each other in confusion. I was never more aware of my 'whiteness' than during the exercise that she then proceeded to initiate. She asked all the students to get up, walk to the small stage in front of them and participate in a stop-and-go type dance that was directed by her playing and stopping American music. Not one of the students initially moved at all, being either confused or embarrassed at what was being asked of them, leading the American lady to ask me to show them. If I could have evaporated into thin air, I would have. Situations like that, where I was singled out as a white person in some way, simultaneously reminded of my outsiderness and my already extant awareness of local culture and custom. I was, if anything, even more embarrassed than the Chinese students at

this forced approach to fun that seemed as much out of place there as it might have been entirely normal at an American high school.

Field notes

O'Reilly (2009) includes the 'lure of acceptance' (O'Reilly, 2009: 89) in her selection of key concepts in ethnography to explain difficulties when writing up field notes. She cites Laureau's (1996) reflections on her fieldwork: 'Thinking about taking notes reminded me that I was as stranger, forced me to observe the situation as an outsider, and prevented me from feeling accepted and integrated' (Laureau, 1996: 218f, cited in O'Reilly, 2009: 90). As my own research progressed, it felt increasingly odd to write about it afterwards or take notes as someone was speaking or just doing something that I was observing. My trips to the university campuses, ENGO meetings or simply dinners and walks with a research participant that I was writing about started to feel like hanging out with friends rather than 'work' or 'research'. The more I spent time with some students, particularly Xiaohui of Beijing Forestry University but also a number of other research participants, the subsequent note-taking reminded me of my status as an outsider. Additionally, the longer I lived in Beijing, the more I became aware of issues like censorship and party control, leading to unexpected difficulties when keeping my field diary.

In public spaces, both research participants and Chinese friends who were not part of my research group told me to keep my voice down when speaking about anything controversial (such as the party, the law, the Communist Youth League or the 3 Ts: Tiananmen, Taiwan and Tibet). I was used to cadre surveillance from my time as a student in Ningbo but this was the first time that it was impacting my life beyond the occasional check of my visa or residence permit. This growing awareness of the restrictions placed on students and some of

the pressures they were under, in contrast to my own experience of university as well as some of the racism I witnessed on the part of foreigners towards the Chinese population (both in Beijing and at home), led to a situation where I effectively kept multiple field diaries. The first set of notes was the 'official' field diary I started off with. Here I would simply try to note down details from events or time spent with participants or interviews in a way that was detailed and factual. An example of such notes would be texts such as the following, annotated with bullet points and short observations:

> *X., K.'s friend sent me a text message to let me know that they were doing the first part of their yearly 'book swap' event on Saturday from 1 to 3 and asked whether I wanted to come along. I said yes and he picked me up from the South Gate of the University by 1 o'clock (weather was really good, blue sky thanks to all the wind, yellow 2.5 readings though still). It turned out that the event was part of a general swapping and selling fair of the University that took place on an area of approximately 150 square metres. 'The Green Family' (henceforth GF) had two stalls. X first showed me the smaller one towards the east side of the fair. K, another girl and another guy were sitting there with her. K said hello, the other two only smiled but seemed rather shy.*

Throughout fieldwork I kept a diary with names, dates and times of people I had met and events I had attended. However, as my fieldwork progressed and I gained insights into students' lives and the various pressures they were under, the detailed accounts became more and more emotional to a degree where I effectively began a second diary or journal. This second set of field notes ended up being a mixture of German, English and Chinese, incomprehensible to anyone who did not know all three languages and even then it would not necessarily make much sense given that I was making references in them that only I could understand. Madden's (2010) advice is that 'ethnographers should strive to be systematic in

the manner in which they initially inscribe, and part of the systemisation should be the attempt to reliably record what they are seeing' (Madden, 2010: 118).

Regarding systematisation, only my first set of field notes as well as the short, bullet point-style notebook that I kept throughout my research would have found favour with Madden. However, although my second approach to taking field notes was somewhat unsystematic and emotional, I found this form of recording my experiences much more helpful throughout fieldwork and during write-up. From the rawness of my own accounts, I was able to start seeing quite clearly my own biases and prejudices that were influencing my research as well as the subsequent development of my own views. Whereas the first set of notes are riddled with sweeping judgements and anger, later ones are much more careful and balanced. Nevertheless, my field diaries remained deeply personal and quite difficult to go back to at times. Another part of my field notes was taken up with observations about the city itself, again separated into rather factual observations such as '*overloaded bins everywhere, no litter separation despite recycling signs*' or '*recycling initiative in the compound garden, everyone given green container for their house, none of the compound foreigners included or present*' and far more emotional and personal accounts such as a long and wordy recollection of a trip from Chaoyang district back home late at night, when I came across a taxi driver that told me of his personal vendetta against the government. He had decided to do his bit to undermine the Party by telling every single one of his passengers, whether they had invited this or not, all the reasons why he thought the government was made up of criminals. He was proud to tell me it was worth the risk, despite the fact that, should he pick up an official, he could easily get in trouble. Such encounters left me deeply affected and made the writing up of field notes a rather messy and emotionally-charged process. Nonetheless, all these notes were crucial to my later reflection on the process I underwent during my fieldwork and also helped to discern certain biases and personal prejudices that were affecting my writing-up process.

Mills and Morton (2013) discuss the evolving nature of research by suggesting that:

> one starts with a research question, develops a research design and then proceeds to 'collect' and analyse one's 'data'. But what if your experience of ethnographic fieldwork not only forces reflection, but leads you to rethink the very research question and design? (Mills and Morton, 2013: 9)

Reviewing my field diary proved extremely helpful for self-reflection during my time back in Oxford in August and September 2013. I also found it beneficial to ask fellow Chinese peers at university back home what they might think of the insights I had gained thus far. This review of my data with other people helped to shape the final set of questions on which I decided for my interviews. My last two months of fieldwork were largely aimed at interviewing and following up with those people I had got to know and interviewed in the first few months. Where I had initially focused my interview questions around for instance the environment, SEA or ENGO life and university, I now included more questions about their families and experiences of growing up as well as much broader questions such as: 'If you could do whatever you wanted with your life, what would that be?'. Questions such as these allowed for a much more comprehensive picture of students' lives and explained, often, their views on environmental, political and social issues in a way that my original interview questions did not lend themselves to.

Interviews, recording and anonymisation

During my pilot trip in September I had already made the decision to leave the vast majority of formal interviews to the last two months of my research. O'Reilly (2012) suggests leaving

‘detailed probing until you have been accepted, especially if you want to mingle and reduce your effort on your surroundings, interviewing reminds people that you are there as a researcher’ (O’Reilly, 2012: 116). As I wished to include ethnographic methods in my research, asking students for formal interviews would have been disruptive to my getting to know them and just ‘hanging out’ with them. By the time I interviewed students one-on-one, almost all of them had come across me before (on campus, or at SEA events) and had heard about my interest in them either through me or through fellow SEA students. During my pilot project and the first few months of my research I had already interviewed both students and ENGO members to test how participants would respond to the use of audio recorders and note taking. There was a noticeable change in responses and behaviour on part of the students when I asked to record them with an audio recording device, whereas ENGO personnel showed no discernible reaction to this method of recording. During the ‘interview phase’ of my research (Oct/Nov 2013) I thus only used an audio recorder for ENGO interviews.

With only very few exceptions, I interviewed students and ENGO workers in a ‘natural field setting’ (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999: 10), rather than a place chosen by me. For those students that did not wish to be interviewed alone, I changed the design to a focus group interview and asked them to choose other SEA members to join, a strategy that also proved very valuable in collecting data on group interaction. Seeing students interact in an interview situation provided me with insights into intergroup dynamics and allowed me to hear from students who would normally choose to stay silent or gave me one-word answers outside interviewing situations. Most students at Jiaotong University wished to be interviewed in the SEA office, which provided both a certain privacy and immediate access to photos, books and other materials related to SEA work that they may have wished to show me. At the Beijing Forestry University, interviewing scenarios changed every time; from empty classrooms to the gardens or the canteens, students chose wherever they wished to be. During interviews

with students, some were immediately passionate and talked non-stop and others seemed surprised and suspicious that I wanted to talk to them. Since interviews were only semi-structured, this sometimes led to vastly different topics being discussed from one student to the next. To ensure some comparability of data, I did cover a basic set of questions with every student regardless of other tangents.

Some students, however, tried to use our encounters to interview me, rather than the other way around. On one such occasion I was interviewing a female second-year student at Beijing Forestry University as we were sitting and later walking across campus. Rather than answering any of my questions she quickly decided to start asking about my life instead, put her arm through mine and questioned me about men and fashion. That sort of 'interview' is in itself conclusive, however, since being uninterested in the subjects I brought up is also an informative piece of data. Interviews with ENGO personnel were significantly more structured and my only source of data on ENGO staff. One-on-one interviews were carried out in their own offices. Since I interviewed them at their workplaces, ENGO personnel will have been influenced, to some degree, by this scenario, an element that I considered in my coding, analysis and write-up.

Coding, analysis and writing

Mills and Morton (2013) suggest that some academics 'shy away from formal coding. They recognise the difficulty of keeping data and analysis separate, seeing each are changed by the other' (Mills and Morton, 2013: 88). At the beginning of my data analysis I felt that to create writing that would both do justice to the diversity of people I encountered while providing insights into individual life stories relevant to the general picture demanded coding of my data. Throughout my fieldwork I had already annotated field notes and interviews with words

such as ‘family’, ‘government’, ‘nature’ and ‘school’. Based on this, I developed a more formal coding system aimed at discerning the various themes emerging from my data. Since the majority of respondents had asked to be anonymised, I first developed a code name system which I also based on abbreviations and names I had come up with during my fieldwork and taking of field notes. I subsequently indexed all factual data I had acquired about the various people I had interviewed, chatted with or observed such as their age, gender, the province they came from and so forth.

Due to the nature of my field note-taking, I did not consider my data ‘raw data’ and regarded them as something that was already influenced by my earlier choices about what I would or would not write down (what Madden refers to as data that has been ‘partially ‘cooked’’ (Madden, 2010: 140). The coding system I used was revised innumerable times throughout my analysis as themes emerged from my data that required sub-theme coding and multiple coding (of notes, passages or whole interviews). The themes that emerged from my data helped me to discern the contributions that I would focus on in my write-up; however, I found coding to be simultaneously illuminating and cloaking as, once I had coded certain segments, I sometimes overlooked their relationship to other themes and I found myself correcting or adding to my codes right up until the end of writing up. According to Madden (2010) this process is common in the analysis of field notes:

> Balancing ‘fact’ and the beginnings of hypothesis in fieldnotes is potentially tricky, but is rendered less difficult if you see the coding of fieldnotes not as a singular act of interrogation but as an unfolding and on-going process that will become more refined as the analysis and interpretation become more resolved. (Madden, 2010: 141)

To complement data collected through interviews, informal chats, hanging out and participant observation, findings were triangulated through content analysis of SEA and ENGO publications, marketing material, pictorial evidence, annual reports, brochures, websites, blogs, newspaper articles and publications by related institutions. Here, the same coding rules applied and, as with field notes and interviews, the coding frame was refined during write-up. The four-paper route to dissertation requires papers to make sense individually and relate to each other in a coherent narrative. Thus my last coding step was an effort to highlight where data was going to be used (such as 'p2 and p3'). The D.Phil. 'paper route' makes it challenging to create continuous narratives around individual characters but it also forces the writer to consider how relevant individual stories are and whether one is only drawn to them for personal rather than academic reasons. I have tried to balance both requirements by presenting data both on majority responses and by highlighting individual takes on certain issues to explore the complexity of the field.

Ethics, access and practical limitations

Gaining access to my informants was made significantly easier through my prior long-term stays in China (Beijing and Ningbo). This was due to my language abilities but also to the fact that I felt at ease conversing with people from various provinces and ages and being aware of much of the cultural fabric of my field site before I arrived. Through my pilot trip, and particularly my first interview with members of CYCAN and environmental journalists, I was given names and contact numbers of SEA students at a number of Beijing universities, all of which (some only after a number of texts and calls however) got back to me eventually and agreed to meet. I had always planned to focus on attending SEA and ENGO events during the first four months and then focus on structured and semi-structured interviews after the summer break.

This approach ensured a certain familiarity on the part of the students with me and my research, and allowed me time to select students I particularly wanted to interview. Since most of campus life is easily accessible at both the Forestry University, Jiaotong University and other universities across the city I could enter and exit freely with the students as well as when unaccompanied. Access problems, however, included for instance student dormitories, which none of the students wished to take me to. I had expected this with regard to the male student dormitories and later saw what one of the female dormitories looked like during a Skype 'tour' that Xiaohui gave me when I was back in the UK. I should have probably pushed harder and insisted that it was very important for my research. This was, however, difficult to do given that I did not want to lose their trust or make them feel uncomfortable.

Another limitation was presented by the prescribed time limit, which made it impossible to attend as many events as I would have liked. I focused on interviewing to collect as many individual stories as possible and thereby missed out on SEA and ENGO events. Most of the SEA events were repeated over and over again so I arguably saw most of what they were routinely doing. There is, though, value in repetition–I would have probably had a different eye for detail if I had attended the same events more often. However, I tried to make up for this by collecting as much of the data that they themselves had stored on past events in terms of pictures, PowerPoint presentations, plans for new events, sketches for clothing (SEA logos), their song, postcards, books and other memorabilia.

Ethical implications of my research largely fell under two categories: the need for anonymisation and the way I presented my research to participants. With very few exceptions, students wished to be anonymised or to be referred to by pseudonyms which was easily done. The responsible anonymisation of research informants and continuous safeguarding of

collected data was adhered to throughout the dissertation project. I also introduced myself as a researcher to each research participant, explained what the research was going to be used for and asked for their consent prior to including them in my research at the outset of fieldwork and again before all of the one-on-one interviews.

Reflections, positionality and reciprocity

Agar (1996) points out two inherent problems with positionality when it comes to fieldwork. The first is the cultural baggage each researcher enters the field with, his or her 'implicit assumptions about the nature of reality [and] a set of biases about which areas of the human situation were worthy of attention' (Agar, 1996: 91). The cultural baggage I brought to the field was most evident to me in my political ideals and my interest in students' political views. This bias is reflected in my initial set of questions which focused on issues surrounding politics and environmental and social justice. By the time I began my intensive interviewing period in October and November 2013, these questions had been overhauled and focused instead on life histories and everyday experiences of life more than the above-mentioned themes.

The second issue with positionality that Agar (1996) identifies is the fact that as 'the ethnographer's role is defined and redefined it will guide group members in their dealings with him or her' (Agar, 1996: 91). Throughout my research and during analysis I was also consistently reflective of the impact of my positionality as a white, female researcher on participant responses. Blatant differences between students and me such as the colour of my skin and position as a foreign researcher led to a variety of assumptions about me on part of the students. I felt the 'outsider' position reflected back to me at times with my research participants and everyday life, going about basic tasks such as food shopping or simply

walking across the city. My position as an 'outsider' was reflected back to me also when students asked for instance what Westerners thought about China or what Westerners thought about Chinese students. I caught myself trying to overcome these barriers by drawing on those aspects of my identity that made me an 'insider', namely my status as a student.

I often drew on such similarities between my research participants and me during interviews and informal chats. My aim was not to 'overcome' my positionality issues but to ensure that these would not dominate the course of my interactions and interviews with participants. Due to my age I was quickly accepted as 'still a student' and someone that was faced with similar current and future life choices and challenges (issues surrounding studies, homesickness, job applications, friendships and relationships). Yet, as a Westerner and student of Oxford University, my informants tended to assume wealth and connections that surfaced sometimes during chats and interviews. I did not consider 'overcoming' my position as an 'outsider' a feasible task nor did I feel my position to be a necessarily a hindrance in gaining meaningful, reliable insights. Arguably, participants expressed things about their political views to me that they would have not shared with a fellow Chinese student. In this respect, however, I also perceived my status as an outsider and their reaction to it as beneficial. My position as an outsider may have shaped what participants told me and I had to remain aware of this in my analysis and write-up; however, it may have also offered me insights into their beliefs and attitudes that would have been harder to come by as a true 'insider'.

My growing familiarity with Chinese students and ENGO workers also increased my awareness of how other Westerners were talking about their host country and its people. During my fieldwork, I found little solace in talking to people back home and I was somewhat stuck between homesickness and an immediate inner rejection of other Westerners around me. I started to avoid contact with other Westerners, a process that initially began without

conscious reflection. Mills and Morton (2013) argue that researchers should maintain a degree of 'methodological relativism' (Mills and Morton, 2013 14), that is in trying to understand their field the researcher should aim to distance him or herself from snap judgements based on extant moral and ethical beliefs. It is argued that 'all ethical and moral positions are contingent, located in particular contexts. Less absolutist positions are more useful' (Mills and Morton, 2013 14). It was only upon my return from the field, throughout analysis and write-up that I felt I was, at least for significant periods of time, able to maintain such 'methodological relativism'.

My field notes and my memories evidence not one but a number of conflicting and constantly evolving morals, values and understandings of the world around me. As I was spending more and more time with Chinese students, ENGO workers or local Chinese friends, my own views on state–society relations were challenged and I felt more and more distant from the expatriate community that many other Western researchers sought solace in. As I was trying to understand the world Chinese youth navigate I felt it easier to be alone when I was not with them or visiting an ENGO, as conversations with other local expatriates kept reminding me of how 'different' my own experience of university and the world in general is and has been. This temporary rejection of Western culture allowed, I felt, for a degree of empathy for and immersion in the local culture that made my observations and interviews significantly more nuanced and reflective of participants' experiences than would have been possible if I had taken a purely interview-focused or survey-based approach to fieldwork.

In terms of reciprocity there were obvious 'paybacks' that some research participants requested (although never in a direct manner) for allowing me to interview them or asking for information and contacts. The most frequent was information about the West, Oxford University and Germany. I was also asked to check applications for Western universities, teach them English and, a source of some difficulty, share my research results with them.

Students at Jiaotong University especially were adamant that I must send them my 'results', the nature of which, at the time of my fieldwork I had become rather uncertain about. Agreeing to share something that had not been written and may well include some critical commentary on their work seemed problematic for two reasons. One, I simply did not wish to upset them should I come to discuss their studies, their environmentalism or their lives in a manner that they did not approve of. The second, and this I was more concerned about at the time, was that this would immediately influence my note-taking process. I worried that, if I promised to share, I would have to live up to this promise and therefore my field notes felt somewhat exposed even at the time of writing. I thus decided not to agree to share my results right after fieldwork and suggested instead that I could give them feedback before I left, since what they were most concerned about was their organisational structure and how they compared to other SEAs across Beijing.

I had become their source of knowledge about the West but also become accepted as a '*different sort of foreigner*', as someone who was '*on their side*'. This came with an obvious challenge: I had, of course, been judging China and the Chinese (however hard I tried to be objective) and this made me wonder whether I was misrepresenting my research or myself. However, due to the confidence they had in me I was also able to reciprocate the insights I gained from them with knowledge and thoughts about Western culture, history and politics. After I came back from the field, one particular Skype conversation with a third-year student from Jiaotong University relieved me of some of my worries. He had moved to Israel to spend a semester abroad, something he had been immensely looking forward to for months. After a few weeks there he had, not unlike me, refused to mingle with the Chinese student population and insisted on making only foreign or local friends at his university. This led to him being seen as a Chinese man who defies the stereotype, meaning that his peers would feel at ease making jokes about the Chinese and China in front of him. He sent me a long message on

Facebook about this and asked whether he could talk to me about it as it made him feel very uncomfortable and sad. The fact that I was able to help him and Xiaohui through such anxieties and questions made me feel that I was ‘giving something back’ to my research participants and allowed me to feel at ease with my own positionality as a researcher.

Fragmented activism: young environmentalists in urban China

On Chinese youth political culture and the impracticability of international academic labels of youth activism and agency.

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss political values of contemporary Chinese youth. I demonstrate that students associate revolutionary acts and protests with chaos (luan) and trace their reaction to state surveillance mechanisms and their approach to environmental activism in particular. The paper explores students' motivations and aims for joining environmental campaigns, and exposes a broad spectrum of political norms and values underlying such activism. I question the analytical value of recent efforts to develop labels of youth activism and agency such as 'Activisms 2010+' and 'active quiescence'. Instead, I propose the notion of 'fragmented activism' to capture the diversity within activist groups and to acknowledge the breadth of values underlying environmental activism and levels of politicisation in Chinese youth.

KEYWORDS: activism; agency; Activisms 2010+, active quiescence; fragmented activism, China

Labels of youth activism and agency in international academic literature

One notable characteristic of 21st century social and political processes is the involvement of urban youth across the world in protest action and mobilisation both on the streets and online. The Arab Spring uprisings (Bayat, 2013), the Occupy Movement (Reimer, 2012; Mottiar, 2013), the 2014 and student protests in Venezuela (The Guardian, 2014), Taiwan (Lee and Culpan, 2014; BBC, 2014) and Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution' (Vukovich, 2015) saw immense participation and leadership by urban youth. *Development and Change* brought together researchers to analyse these different uprisings and forms of activism in a special issue on 'Activisms 2010+'. In Biekart and Fowler's (2013) introduction they suggest that these dispersed forms of activism represent 'a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media, and by a common set of rights-based demands' (Biekart and Fowler, 2013: 534). These activisms are seen to be driven by a globally-shared value set that is inspired by democratic ideals and aimed at challenging dominant power structures in pursuit of 'democracy, social justice and dignity' (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013: 547). Other research, however, suggests that prevailing assumptions about the nature of activism overlook alternative forms of political engagement and different ideas of justice and freedom (Mahmood, 2005, Daly, 2010). Dyson's (2014) book on youth in rural India also describes instances where young people are actively choosing to maintain political and social hierarchies to advance their claims, leading her to suggest that this obedience is in fact a form of 'active quiescence' where youth actively choose to abide by the rules to further their claims.

In 2013, during my fieldwork in China the subject of reform versus revolution ran through countless conversations I had with young environmental activists. At lunch with a graduate

from Renmin University in Beijing, an alumnus of the university's anti-climate change group, he referred to the recent uprising in Egypt to explain his point of view: *'Look at what happened in Egypt, we don't want that in China! It's just chaotic. In China, we want reform but we don't want a revolution'*. Since the protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, student protests have been largely absent from the political scene in China (Wright, 2012). In fact, of the little open protest there has been, most was inspired by nationalistic sentiments, such as the anti-Japan protests in 2005 and 2012 (Baculinao, 2012). There was an attempt to incite protest action after the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, called by some the 'Jasmine Revolution'. But the turnout was minimal and it remains unclear who tried to organise these protests (Franceschine and Negro, 2014). This paper will address the nature of youth activism and agency in Beijing by exploring the behavioural norms and attitudes driving youth to be involved in one of the few areas of civic action sanctioned by the state – environmental campaigning. I discuss how the Chinese case informs recent geographic debates on youth agency and novel forms of activism and question the analytical currency of labels of youth activism and agency such as 'Activisms 2010+' (Biekhart and Fowler, 2012) and 'active quiescence' (Dyson, 2014).

Research for this paper traced how China's urban environmentalists fit into the global debate on youth activism and agency, how they position themselves in relation to the government and how they seek to promote their cause. My findings show that even anti-regime minded or fervently environmentalist youth interviewed during fieldwork reject the idea of protest action of any kind. The avoidance of chaos (luan) was an overriding principle that explains students' aversion to Arab spring style protests. This paper will explore students' associations with and aversion to contentious politics and explain students' general reluctance to engage in oppositional politics. However, I also highlight the broad spectrum of politicisation, and diversity in political beliefs and motivations underlying youths' involvement in environmental

activism. By exploring students' views of protest action and state surveillance in greater depth I offer evidence that we need to rethink concepts such as 'agency' and 'activism' to better understand this generation of youth movements and activism, and youth activism and agency in China in particular. Having drawing attention to the underlying nuances in beliefs and political values expressed by youth involved in environmental activism in China, I then put forward the concept of 'fragmented activism' to capture the diversity in youth activist groups.

By outlining the motivations underlying students' road to environmental activism in the first part of this paper I show the diversity of life experiences and political beliefs fuelling involvement in environmental activism. I argue that the unifying principle that all these young activists share is a deep aversion to contentious politics, which they equate with chaos. In the second section I outline the historical usage and contemporary associations of the word chaos (luan) as well as party mechanisms of repression within the university and online. Through this I show that it is not only impossible to draw a clear line between 'active' agency and 'passive' acceptance as suggested by Dyson (2014) in her work on 'active quiescence'; I also highlight the limits of allegedly global norms underlying youth activism as outlined in 'Activisms 2010+'. I argue for a more careful analysis of the motivations and restrictions shaping young peoples activism and political beliefs. I then suggest that the notion of 'fragmented activism' offers a framing concept more attuned to the diversity of political beliefs and motivations underlying activism. Whilst activists may be joined temporarily or for longer periods of time in cause and action and united in some basic political beliefs – such as an aversion to contentious politics – the following example will show that groups of activists can nonetheless be highly fragmented in their politics. Participation in environmental activism is neither a clear indicator of a value set of Activisms 2010+, nor of active quiescence, but a complicated mixture of both, shaped by local histories of activism.

Research focus

Environmental degradation and related health issues have become a major source of social unrest all over China. The country's air pollution in particular has made headlines around the world. In response to this evolving environmental crisis the government has allowed environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) to emerge, leading scholars to suggest that this new political space may finally allow for the democratisation of political processes and increased public participation in government. Research on ENGOs indicates that the environmental agenda is indeed perceived as a good opportunity for activists to promote public participation, and that cooperation with the government is a first and transient step towards a more democratic political system (Cooper, 2006; Ho and Edmonds, 2007). While research on the political potential of the environmental movement is evolving, one of its major constituencies remains largely neglected.

There is a strong presence of students and young people all over China who promote environmentalist values in government-sanctioned associations (Yang, 2005; Wu, 2006).
These range from student environmental associations to environmental NGOs as well as international youth organisations such as Model United Nations and AIESEC. By investigating students that are active in university-based student environmental associations (SEAs) and environmental NGOs (ENGOS) this project was designed to investigate the attitudes and behavioural norms that underlie young people's interest in environmental protection.

In 2004, ENGOs in China mobilised student support for anti-dam protests in Yunnan. In this case, students were openly targeting the Yunnan government in protest, and temporarily succeeded in halting this economic megaproject. Apart from this national campaign and a few

localised anti-pollution protests, however, young people do not openly criticise or challenge the regime on its disastrous environmental record (Stalley and Yang, 2006). Survey-based research on the underlying motivations of youth environmentalism have led scholars to draw differing conclusions about these young people's mores and values (see for instance Wong, 2003 and Stalley and Yang, 2006).

By examining more closely students involved in environmental protection activities through the above-named organisations, this project set out to investigate what form their activism takes and what values it is driven by. Questions guiding the research included: Are their efforts aimed at challenging environmental policy? Do they believe the government can solve the current environmental crisis? Does their action repertoire ever move beyond that suggested by official guidelines? And does their environmentalist agenda go hand in hand with demands for social justice, dignity and (in the context of an authoritarian China most controversially) democratic ideals that are expressed by youth in other parts of the world?

To this end, I interviewed 50 students and young professionals in Beijing over the course of six months of fieldwork. These open-ended interviews were complemented by participant observation, informal chats and 'hanging-out', as well as follow-up online conversations on Skype and *Weixin* (a Chinese online messaging service) from March 2013 to April 2014. The majority of student participants attended either Beijing Forestry University or Beijing Jiaotong University. Environmental NGOs included: China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN), the Jane Goodall Institute China (JGI), Nature University (ziran daxue), Beijing Green Student Forum and 706 Youth Space. To protect the anonymity of my interviewees, all names have been changed.

Lanza's (2012) work on the history of 'youth movements' in China alerts us to the problem of framing something as a 'youth movement', or of describing participants as 'youth' when the political significance of this category is not evident to the participants, movement dynamics or outcomes. However, research participants for this paper identified themselves as 'young people' (*nianqing ren*), and referred to their peers in this manner. Additionally, they commented on their experience of and concerns over the current environmental, political and social situation as markedly different to that of older and younger generations. With the exception of two out of four ENGO leaders and a few long-term employees, the age group of participants falls under the Chinese National Bureau of Statistic's definition of youth.[7]

This paper does two things. It addresses why Chinese youth are not involved in open protest and contentious politics, and it highlights the diversity in political values present in this generation of university students.

Part 1 Environmental activism– student motives and political values

In a country that has seen hardly any political participation from students since the Tiananmen protests of 1989 (Wright, 2012), environmental campaigning offers a unique space for civic action on the part of students. Overwhelmed with the task of implementing sustainable environmental policies, the government has allowed environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) and student environmental associations (SEAs) to spring up all over the country. These organisations are officially independent of the state, but overseen by local CCP bureaus (Liu, 2007; Yang, 2005: 54). Student-run environmental protection activities are now a part of almost every major university campus in Beijing (CYCAN, interview). They are usually organised in what is commonly referred to as a *huanbao shetuan*, which translates as a

[7] According to China's fifth census of 2000, 'youth' is defined as spanning the ages of 15 to 29, accounting for c.25.36% of the population. For the purposes of this research, youth is defined as the age group 18–29.

student environmental association (henceforth denoted as SEA[8]). But such activities can also be part of, for instance, *pashan shetuan* (hiking associations) and are often integral to the efforts of international student associations such as Model United Nations or AIESEC. Additionally, environmental protection activities, such as the recycling of plastic bottles, are sometimes included in the duties of the Communist Youth League (henceforth denoted as CYL) and sub-bodies of this such as the *shelian* (associations' liaisons), a student and teacher run body that is meant to oversee student associations and liaise between associations and the CYL. Although the largest part of my research was comprised of interviews with members of SEAs and ENGOs, the following analysis includes members of all of these associations to develop an understanding of the networks in which students are embedded and the hierarchies and censorship which their work is subjected to.

Student activists

Students' economic and social backgrounds as well as their explanations for participating in environmental protection activities were immensely varied. With the exception of 5 of them, all students and young professionals were only children and about 40 of them had moved to Beijing from another city or the countryside. Some came from nearby provinces like Shandong and Hebei but many had travelled far across the country, from southern provinces like Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian and western ones like Shaanxi and Gansu. Degrees read included but were not limited to: Transport Studies, Logistics, Information Technology, Forest Management, Engineering, Environmental Engineering, Wood Science, Social Studies, Media and Languages. Whilst some had developed an interest in their environment during childhood, through exposure to nature or pollution, others only began to care once they discovered environmental activism at university. For some, environmental protection itself

[8] Translation by Lu, H. (2003), all other translations by author.

remained marginal to their commitment to environmental campaigning; they remained involved in student environmental associations primarily because of the friendship networks that they had established there or, else, for CV purposes. Others became so passionate about the environmental cause that they chose to take positions of responsibility within the SEA as volunteers, or even applied for full-time work at environmental NGOs. Their family backgrounds varied, from sons and daughters of factory workers, to those of high school teachers and party cadres. To showcase the diversity of personal views and histories that led to an interest in environmental activism I will introduce a number of students active in SEAs and ENGOs in more detail in the following section:

Take Xiaohui, a 19 year old second-year student of Wood Science at the Forestry University. Xiaohui grew up in Guangzhou, her father works in a governmental agency for urban planning. She explained to me that she first realised the government would not take real responsibility for keeping the environment clean and safe when, as a high school student, she witnessed a large scale, yet shortly lived, environmental clean up campaign, instigated by the Guangzhou government during the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou. At the time, she observed that, although the governments efforts to clean up the waters ways and air pollution ended after the games, officials continued to report improvements by publishing data on pollution, reports that could therefore only be fake. Although her father works for the government, she said she never got this information from him, but from the media and her '*own analysis*'. Her father would not discuss politics, inclusive of environmental politics. Her parents also did not talk to her about their own upbringing or political views, these were topics that did not come up or were avoided. She only knew that both parents went to school quite late and that her parents both strongly opposed the political upheavals during the Cultural Revolution. Xiaohui's views, she said, came from her own mind. Even before she went to university, she came into contact with environmental activism through meeting a

member of the China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN) in Guangzhou. His work, she said, inspired her to do something herself. CYCAN's environmental awareness campaigns in Guangzhou, impressed on her the idea that each individual had a responsibility to carry to contribute to society, to contribute to what she now perceives to be the only way forward in the fight for environmental and social change and what she calls '*slow, small changes'*. Although committed to SEA and ENGO work throughout her time at Beijing Forestry University, she believed the difference they made to be incredibly small. Her commitment sprang from her belief that she had to do something, even it did not change much, rather than a conviction that this was a way to make a real difference.

Whilst Xiaohui described her activist commitment as a moral imperative despite its potential lack of impact, other students, like Yangyang, were convinced their work would effect the changes necessary to stop further environmental degradation in his home country. When I met Yangyang, a 22-year-old fourth year student of Environmental Engineering from Liuzhou University in Guangxi province, he had just started his internship with the Beijing based environmental NGO 'Nature University'. Yangyang grew up in the industrial city Hancheng in Shaanxi, a province known for its coal and steel industry. He explained that while his interest in the environment was nurtured first and foremost at University, through the SEA he attended there, it ultimately sprang from his experience of growing up in a heavily polluted city. The pollution he was exposed to, from the coal-mines in and around Hangcheng, showed him the severe side effects of pollution. Yangyang firmly believed in his responsibility to save the environment and considered ENGO work as the best way to advance the environmental agenda. The government he thought, was overwhelmed with the task and not truly committed to solving the problem. In contrast to Xiaohui, who was sceptical of the impact NGOs and SEAs could have, Yangyang was highly enthusiastic about ENGO work, and optimistic about their capacity to bring about significant and sustainable change for the environment.

A very different take on the role of the government was voiced by Wangcheng, a 2nd year student from the Beijing Technology and Business University, and one of the leaders of the University's SEA. Wangcheng, was already a member of the Communist Youth League and proudly told me of his Communist ancestors. His grandfather, for instance, died when fighting the Kuomingtang forces (Nationalist party) in the civil war. He aspired to become a cadre in the Communist party himself, believing firmly, as he said, that China was still on its way to Communism. Capitalism he said was only a natural step on China's road to Communism and environmental pollution a natural side effect of capitalist development - regrettable but inevitable for while. Yet, he argued, because it was such a big problem, it also offered an excellent opportunity to truly make a difference for his country. He summarised his take on environmental campaigning as such:

> *When you go to an old peoples home, or to a hospital, you can bring happiness for that one moment, but when you raise awareness for the environment you can help many people for a long time.*

For Wangcheng environmental activism was yet another possibility to raise his profile as a good member of the Communist Youth League, as someone who truly cares about his country.

As an enthusiastic member of the CYL, students like him are detested by young men like Yingqi, a third year student of Computer Science at JiaoTong University. To Yingqi, and Xiaohui, CYL members were opportunists, whose apparent enthusiasm for SEA work and the Communist Youth League stems not from love for nature, or truly held political beliefs, but from purely careerist motives. Being a member of the CYL meant good connections to the

teachers, who could help with job applications or applications for internships, the possibility of a career in the party itself, and a 'good CV'. To those students who objected to state monitoring and did not believe in the benevolent nature of the CCP, students who actively fostered ties with this regime lacked integrity. They were '*dependent*' people and '*corruptible*'. In Yingqi's case this impression of CCP supporters had developed despite having been brought up by a cadre himself.

Yingqi had joined in with SEA activities and ENGO talks and set up an environmental education programme for local primary students run by Jiaotong students when he started on his Computer Science degree in 2011. He said that growing up he had '*always had a dream'*, and his dream was to make a difference in his country. Environmental pollution was but one of many areas where he felt his country needed people like him to step up and '*become active'*. Not unlike Wangcheng his family has ties to the Communist rulers. He is the son of a government official working in the Hydraulics department in Hefei, two hours by train from Yingqi's home city near Shanghai. His father, a member of the party and well-connected man, he thought, could '*most definitely get him a good job*'. Yet, Yingqi had decided not to use any of his father's connections, having realised at university that '*all party members are corrupt and I don't want to ever be like them*'. His father himself, had slowly begun to criticise the party, worrying in particular about the personality cult that the party seemed to be building around President Xi. It reminded Yingqi's father, and many other onlookers[9], of Maoist times. Yingqi, although fiercely nationalist, had mostly scorn for government officials and those connected to them. He thought that he had many fellow students who had entered university based on such connections and without ever having passed the end of the highly competitive university entrance exame *gaokao*. He started to skip classes and dropped out of all student

9 For an indepth discussion about this from 4 of the worlds most prestigious China scholars see: http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/does-xi-jinping-represent-return-mao-era

run initiatives, including environmental campaigning within SEA or AIESEC structures. Although most of the time he could not leave campus, he considered his rejection of campus social and political structures as liberating. His interest in the environment remained but he no longer wished to participate in the SEA and ENGO campaigning, believing this work to lack true impact. He even more fervently rejected any such efforts on the part of the CYL and joked that:

> *The Communist Party has 80 million members, around 80 of them actually believe in Communism.*

Students who are part of the CYL he derogatorily called 'obedient children' ('guaiguaihaize' 乖乖孩子). His interest in environmental campaigning remained but he was at loss at how to pursue this interest given the opportunities at hand.

Wenli, a 2nd year at Jiaotong and head of the SEA, was equally sceptical of all CYL activities. She told me about a recent compulsory essay she had to write titled '*Reasons why the Chinese Communist Party is great'*. She said it annoyed her that she had to waste her time on this, but laughed and said that this was simply '*how things were'*. In contrast to Yingqi, however, this did not lead to her rejection of SEA campaigning. Instead she said, it made her more adamant to continue campaigning. Wenzhao, a first year student of 'Communication Engineering', was an avid participant in the SEA run by Wenli. He recalled spending time at his grandfather's house in the countryside in Guangxi (a province in the South of China), where he would spend summers catching butterflies and growing vegetables with his grandfather. This is where he learned to love nature, and it is because of his exposure to nature that Wenzhao argues that people can learn to love and protect it. He stressed that his parents came from a truly humble background and were still humble people, factory workers who cared about

making money, but not about the environment. Although his parents did not raise him to care about the environment, he said in raising him his parents *'were like nature'* - they did not interfere too much, and let him grow into the person he wanted to be, allowing him to become a spokesperson for nature. He explained to me that to his mind, environmentalism was like a revolution. It has to come '*from the people*', which requires them to be aware of environmental problems in the first place and it was his aim to show his fellow students the beauty of nature.

Whilst these students are united (at least until they quit attending, like Yingqi) by their commitment to environmental activism, and expressed a deep wish to do something for their countries, and to change it for the better, these ambitions both in the realm of environmental activism and political values in general differ markedly. It is with this fragmentation of belief systems in mind that I suggest in this paper the notion of fragmented activism. Some, like Xiaohui, thought that the state's 'pollution management' was effectively only focused on temporary clean up campaigns for international audiences, like the Asian Games in Guangzhou, and saw environmental activism as her 'duty', something she had to do, as the government failed to do it. She remained however, sceptical about the impact she could have, stressing continuously that '*one person cannot change the world*'. Yangyang, who had grown up in a polluted city, also saw it as a responsibility to get involved, yet his take on ENGO and SEA work differed greatly. Whereas Xiaohui believed that the restrictions placed on environmental activism by the state limited their impact, Yangyang interpreted the state's inability to solve the environmental crisis as a sign that the state was overwhelmed, and therefore needed people like him to step up. Wangcheng, the young CYL member, portrayed pollution as the side-effect of capitalism, a necessary side effect on China's road to Communism and a good opportunity to showcase once again his love for his country. Yingqi, frustrated with the political structures shaping all forms of activism and student activities,

decided to act on this rejection of the party by dropping out of all student organisations, including his environmental education initiatives.

These students come from vastly different backgrounds, from polluted cities or relatively pristine countryside, from families involved in politics to those of factory workers like Wenzhao. However, these geographical, social and political backgrounds do not affect their activism in a straightforward way. There is no clear trajectory from a certain kind of family background to a certain stance on environmental activism. Rather, both their individual backgrounds and belief systems evidence a highly fragmented group of young activists that are united only in their commitment to campaigning on behalf of the environment, their knowledge of state control over their action repertoire, and their fear of chaos.

As such, their profile is very different to the activists groups painted in research by scholars of Activisms 2010+. From those objecting to capitalism on Wall Street to those fighting for political freedom in the Arab countries their values are pictured as based on widely shared beliefs in social justice, dignity and democracy (Glasius and Pleyers, 2013). However, the motivations and political values underlying environmental activism on Beijing's campuses is far from homogenous. Although it is one of the few areas of civic action that students can get involved in, this appeals to both those who reject CCP leadership and wish to take a difference through this platform, as well as those embracing the regime and wanting to show their support. The spectrum of motivations and political values is broad and whilst there is unity in action when it comes to organised SEA or ENGO work there is little agreement about the impact of this work and the role party bodies like the CYL should or should not play in shaping activism. Whilst these students have very different experiences of CCP leadership, and ways of responding to the power structures established by the regime, they are united in their opinion when it comes to two crucial subjects: control and chaos. State control of student

activities runs deep, and plays a major part in shaping the campaign repertoire of environmental activists. As I will evidence in the next section, some students are frustrated by this, and object to constant monitoring. However, whether they support or object to being controlled – or ambivalent to it – they are all ultimately united in the view that control is necessary to contain chaos, which is seen as inevitable consequence of protest action.

Control and Chaos

1. Control

After a few months in the field the conversations with Xiaohui, who had so far introduced me to all the organisational ins and outs of SEA life at Beijing Forestry University, suddenly moved from discussing environmental education campaigns, water pollution and such day-to-day things to censorship, oppression and fear of the authorities of the one-party state. Gaining her trust took hours and hours of conversation and 'hanging out' time, and Xiaohui's reluctance to open up about these topics was mirrored in the reactions of many of her peers when I brought up such subjects. I gathered plenty of evidence that there was good reason to be worried and that, whether there was a real danger of being monitored or not, students were keenly aware that they had to censor what they said.

Xiaohui asked me to lower my voice when we first spoke about such matters and told me that I should not kid myself into thinking one could do anything '*really effective*' against the party:

> *In China, when you go for a walk, never go with more than 2 people, or you'll immediately have 4 policemen on your heels.*

OR:

In Beijing, when you see a crowd… just wait for 20 minutes or so and the police will come. Even if they gathered so for other reasons, it doesn't matter, police will come and break it up.

A few weeks before this I gained first-hand experience of this constant state surveillance when I joined the environmental NGO 'Nature University' on their trip to clean up illegal waste-dumping in a southern Beijing suburb. I met the head of the NGO at a bus stop south of Beijing, where we were joined by a middle-aged man dressed in an all-white polyester tracksuit, who said that he had heard of the event online and wanted to help. After he arrived the NGO leader spent the entire one-hour trip to the waste-dumping site in silence, and upon arrival he told me that the man must be with the police, to monitor them. Just before we began to shovel the garbage that had been dumped on the field onto a truck, he gave me a camera and asked me to take pictures of the event to be uploaded to the ENGO website later. He added to also take pictures of the man in the white tracksuit. It became clear why he had asked me to do this when I began to take pictures, and every time I took a picture of the man in the tracksuit, he felt compelled to actually partake in the activity and look like an environmental activists. He had clearly not counted on actually having to shovel garbage and I made sure to take pictures of him often enough to keep him busy throughout the event.

The mechanisms employed by the state to limit civic action in the field of environmental activism are not always as straight-forward as this type of monitoring. Ability for action on the part of activists can also be severely hindered through bureaucratic obstacles: A telling story about the state's response to environmental activism is one that a student told me when

we are all hanging out at one of their SEA 'book swap' events[10]. A year before I arrived this student attended an event where the 'Nature University' ENGO took students to check local water sources for pollution levels. The results were sent to the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau to alert them to the problem. A while after sending the samples, the head of 'Nature University' visited a SEA event, put his phone on loudspeaker in front of the SEA members. He then went on to show them how the bureau was endlessly redirecting his call to one cadre after another, all of which declared the next one to be responsible, until they simply hung up on him altogether. All students seemed to find this story very funny and said it was an example of the party being *weidabudiao*[11], that is, rendered ineffective by subordinates.

Although students like Xiaohui and Wenli (and ENGO activists) are frustrated with the limits set on them, and the lack of responsiveness (or excessive monitoring) on part of the party, they also have learned to accept this as the reality that their work was embedded in, or as Wenli put it as '*how things are'*. This tension between hopes for change and the realities of censorship shapes not only their action repertoire but necessarily also how they evaluate their own impact.

Gaining students' trust allowed me to understand just how deep the extent of government control of student activities runs. Activities of the Jiaotong SEA for instance are not remarkably different from those of any other university. Their schedule is mostly taken up with campaigns for bottle recycling, saving paper (such as book swaps) and various environmental education initiatives that range from teaching peers about the various plants on their university campus to posters and information stands on air pollution. Nevertheless, theoretically at least, SEA activities are not pre-determined by university guidelines. I had

[10] biannual event aimed at saving paper by encouraging students from the higher years to give their used study books to next years course participants.
[11] 尾大不掉

assumed as much since every SEA across Beijing seemed to be doing the same things and, seeing how contentious environmental debates had become in other parts of the country, it seemed likely that the university was restricting SEA activities to a certain number of government-sanctioned topics. The power mechanisms controlling their work however are not quite as straightforward as a top-down list of approved activities.

Wenli, the SEA leader at Jiaotong University, told me that they were, at least officially, free to choose whatever environmental topic they wanted to take an interest in. They did however, have to put in an application to the *shelian* and a teacher to get approval of the proposed activity and to get the money to realise it (for, say, poster and flyer printing or to rent out a bus for external activities such as camping or to visit an animal shelter). Wenli was visibly angry when she told me about this. She said it was a way to restrict them, to make sure that they were not causing trouble. If the *shelian* or the teachers did not like a proposal they would simply take weeks to approve it, sometimes taking so long that the proposed date for the activity would pass. Handing in applications even earlier was not an option because there were guidelines restricting the timeframe for submission.

Both the Forestry and Jiaotong universities have strict rules about signing up to students associations as well as all other aspects of associational life. The university-run student bodies such as the Communist Youth League (CYL), the student union and the university volunteers' club enjoy privileges over other associations in finding new members. Their sign-up process takes place prior to all others and many of their activities, talks and shows are compulsory for all students to attend whether they are members or not. This power hierarchy is continually reinforced in the running of SEA life. All SEA events must be approved by a variety of university bodies, including the CYL. Everything SEA students wish to organise outside of official university clubs is monitored and restricted to the campus. It is for example almost

impossible to get permission for off-campus activities, let alone the money for it. When they do have a campaign on campus, saving electricity and water for instance, they are checked up on by teachers and other students, in order to ascertain whether they are in the exact spot on campus that they said they were going to be. SEA members may collectively visit animal shelters and local schools for environmental education purposes; such allowances only encompass non-campaign oriented outings however.

Over the years rules for cooperation with other university clubs have kept changing: sometimes they were allowed, and then suddenly they were not, without any explanation. The spaces for student activism are defined and constrained by university authorities, including members of the CYL. Such monitoring, however, is not exclusive to environmental associations. During my pilot trip in December 2012 the Los Angeles Times reported on a number of incidents at Peking University, describing how the CYL attempts to control all aspects of student life, writing that '*it can be a tortuous endeavour for students to simply engage in extracurricular activities. Registered groups are tightly controlled by a draconian bureaucracy, and unregistered groups (...) often face restrictions, intimidation and worse'* (Kaiman, 2012). At the SEA events, however, I never once noticed a teacher or student that was not part of the SEA monitoring their behaviour. Some of the SEA students were enrolled in both SEA and CYL life and at all these events SEA students remained within the area designated to them. The hierarchies at university are thus not enforced so much through actual monitoring but through the possibility of being monitored. Students like Wenli and Xiaohui were responsible for organising most of the SEA events and for deciding which new campaign ideas would be discussed and presented to the shelian. Whilst Wenli and Xiaohui could not be sure whether they were being monitored, the presence of SEA members who were also part of the CYL ensured that they guarded their words and ideas even amongst their fellow environmental activists. Whilst for experienced environmental activists, like NGO

leaders, it is easy to identify members of the police, such as the man in the white track suit, student activists find it almost impossible to know which of their peers may be reporting back to the CYL.

Xiaohui felt so closely monitored and censored by the Communist Youth League and university staff that she said she felt like *'a door, like they can come in any time. They want to take away my thoughts'* and that she needed to *'protect her original thought.*' And Wenli whispered to me during a walk on campus:

> *You know there is a big secret that they don't tell you when you're in school in China. You think, you just have to make it through the gaokao, this is the worst time of your life and then you will be free. University seemed like heaven to us. But then you get here and you realise: It's the same! You don't have to work quite as hard but still, there is no freedom here.*

Another lever that teachers and *shelian* members can pull is money – or rather, the restriction of it. An activity may get approved by both of them but they then refuse to hand out enough money to realise it, despite the fact that the SEA collected the money from its members. All student associations (except the *da shetuans*, the big university associations) have to hand in the money they collect to the *shelian,* and then formally apply to use it each time they propose an activity. Wenli explained that this was yet another easy way to restrict them - by granting approval and then granting insufficient funds. Getting a new activity approved is a laborious and bureaucratic affair, eating away at much of the students' already sparse free time and with no guarantee of success. These, however, are only the administrative challenges that SEA members must circumvent.

They can also be subjected to criticism on the university's intranet: a platform where students can voice their opinions on the activities of various student bodies, including the SEA's. This is one of the reasons why Wenli does not dare attract too much attention, although she has found ways around the other restrictions. She realised for instance that it was easier for an activity to get approved if she made a teacher suggest it to the CYL rather than hand in an application herself. Teacher support for SEA work is paramount to their success, but it does not solve the issue of funds. This, Wenli reported, can be helped by gaining sponsorship from businesses who are in exchange promoted at the SEA events. These means of circumventing university control do not however shield them from online criticism. And even if they dared ignore it, Wenli believes higher authorities would immediately interfere if they seemed to digress from the party line, let alone criticise it. When I asked Xiaohui whether control mechanisms there were the same she emphatically confirmed that this was the case, saying:

> *They are everywhere, they always know what you are doing.*

This fear of the CYL ran so deep in Xiaohui and Wenli that they repeatedly retracted some of what they had said. Wenli sent me text messages, explaining to me that *'I should not have said this, I don't really know that much about it*', only to express the same views when I saw her the next time. During one of my interviews at the Jiaotong University SEA office, Wenzhao, the 1st year from Guangxi, who wished to show students nature and teach them to love it pointed to the numerous CYL awards that were put up in one corner of the office. Instead of voicing pride about the SEAs achievements he said that the CYL was expecting them to take part in university and sometimes city-wide competitions for the best student associations: an effort that he described as a '*real waste of time'*. By requesting that the SEA come up with an environmental protection activity that they had to present at these competitions, the CYL was making sure that once again whatever format the SEA chose

would be within approved CYL guidelines. Additionally this makes the CYL itself look as if it is prioritising environmental protection.

Apart from mechanisms that were directly related to the format of SEA activity, students also reported pressure from teachers and other students (mostly members of the CYL or the so-called 'student union') to reduce time spent on the SEA and to focus on high grades and networking for jobs in the CYL or the student union instead. In terms of economic prospects, joining either the student union (*xueshenghui*), the CYL or the *shelian* is considered to be of paramount importance in finding a job. Since the beginning of 2013, party control of universities has increased enormously. President Xi's campaign against 'Western thought' has recently led to increased control of teaching material but also additional monitoring of student activities and opinions. This monitoring process relies on student party members to 'pay attention to their fellow students' speech and actions both on and offline and to report back to the professors anything suspect or unusual' (Piao, 2014).

Yingqi, told me that working within a university club had begun to make him feel as if university was '*like a cage'*. He felt, that within the boundaries set on him by the University and Communist Youth League he could have no real impact and that he would find other ways of '*changing society'*. Wenli, the head of the Jiaotong SEA, was also frustrated with this constant monitoring and pressure. She conceded that she knew she was foregoing good connections and good grades if she kept up her commitment to the SEA, but she was willing to sacrifice. She did not want to give in to the 'dependent' CYL people, such as Wangcheng.

2. Chaos

Throughout fieldwork this tension between student's ambitions for environmental activism and the reality of censorship and control was evident, it shaped their understanding of their

own role and impact. Yet this objection, by some students, to party control was oddly paired with a belief that control was necessary to avoid chaos (luan). Clearly, students do police their own behaviour in light of party control and, as such, the absence of oppositional politics is not necessarily a sign of acceptance or CCP support, but of self-protection. However, when asked about protests and demonstrations and generally trying to challenge the government in more outright forms, these young people responded that such protest is not only dangerous but also ineffective.

Their rejection of open protest is not just born of fear for themselves; it is also a reflection of how students think about revolution and how they value open opposition. The Arab Spring was referred to numerous times as an example of how much chaos (*luan*) open protest and revolution can bring. It was explained to me that China is simply too big and its society and institutions not advanced enough to allow for a transition to democracy. Although a democratic system is desired by these young people, they do not wish for a sudden transformation, let alone a revolution. I was also baffled to realise that the same students who complained to me about university control of their activities conceded that the university did not have a choice but to monitor student associations to make sure that they did not become *luan* (chaotic). The same was said about the government's responsibility to contain protests: although students wanted the government to hear its critics and to improve governance, they were adamant that this should not happen to the detriment of social stability.

Whilst students come from different backgrounds, have different political belief systems and widely different opinions on the CCP in particular these young activists are nonetheless united in their belief that control is necessary to contain chaos. Yet again, their response to control once again can only be summarised as 'highly fragmented' - whilst some align with the government, like the hopeful cadre Wangcheng, others like Yingqi reject SEA work

altogether as a result of constant monitoring. Even those who believe the constant surveillance limits the impact of their actions nevertheless object to any form of contentious politics – which would only be 'luan' - chaotic.

> Luan 乱, the word for *disorder*, originated, in iconographic terms, from a character showing two hands and silk threads hung on a stand. It used to mean *unravelling* before evolving to signify that idea of pervasive disorder known in the West as *chaos* (…) – in China *luan* points to social disorder but with cosmic implications. The word itself evokes forces deeply threatening to family, clan, or to the nation as a whole. (McCormack and Blair, 2015: 166)

In China, *luan* （乱） and related words such as *dongluan* (动乱: turmoil, disturbance, upheaval, unrest, turbulence)[12] have been used to describe political protest action long before the Arab Spring protests. The 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' for instance is now known as the 'ten years of chaos' (十年动乱， shi nian dongluan) (Jian, Song & Zhou, 2015). During this time students from all ages were called on by Mao Zedong to purge the 'capitalist' and 'elitist' elements in the Party, including academics and educators. Students in Beijing were the first to organise as 'Red Guards' and started to fulfil the Chairman's demands, and what started as humorous ideas such as changing street names and traffic light regulations soon turned into a nationwide regime of arbitrary terror and torture (Herberer, 2009). Wang (1999) calls these events a 'revolution from above' and depicts the majority of Red Guard students not as revolutionaries that tried to battle old power structures but rather as rebels who 'simply sought to maximise their own power' (Wang, 1999: 197). In 1976 the CCP regime ended the nationwide upheavals by employing the armed forces and since then the Cultural Revolution decade remains a traumatic memory, a 'decade of chaos'. Chee

[12] The New Chinese English Dictionary, Shanghai Jiaotong University Press 343

(2006) notes that *luan* is 'the single most common descriptor of the Cultural Revolution and the avoidance of *luan* has been a key part of CCP ideology over the past twenty-five years. (…) Both economic reform and political control contribute to the shared overriding goal of stability and to the avoidance of *luan*.' (Cheek, 2006: 57). Heberer (2009) suggests that '[e]ven now the fear of social and political instability still prevails among the political elites as well as among the common people, because instability is equated with Mao's political campaigns and particularly with the experiences of the Cultural Revolution and therefore with chaos (luan)' (Herberer, 2009: 180). This is also clearly reflected in student rhetoric during the last student protests on Tiananmen Square in 1989, when students tried to firmly distinguish themselves from the Red Guard generation (Lanza, 2013). The Tiananmen protests, which were infamously repressed by the Chinese army and led to the massacre of students and civilians in Beijing, was based around demands for democratisation and political and institutional reform. Just before CCP forces were used to end the protests by employing the military the national newspaper 'People's Daily' published editorials condemning the protesters as inciting turmoil (dongluan) and leading the state into chaos. Such wording on the part of state media recently made a chilling return in the media, when a People's Daily editorial stated that students taking part in the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong were 'disturbing societal order (raoluan) and that the consequence would be 'unthinkable' (People's Daily, 2014)[13]. *Luan*, the word they used to describe protest translates also to: *in a mess, confused, disordered and disturbed (state of mind)*.[14] These meanings are significant, as protesters are not only portrayed as causing chaos, but it is also insinuated that people who protest are mentally ill. Ho (2014) points out that chief forensic scientist at Peking University made it irrevocably clear where the state stands on protests when he said that he considers at least 99% of China's petitioners to be mentally ill, even if the majority of them do not show

[13] 不堪设想 bukanshexiang, also translates to: too horrible to contemplate
[14] The New Chinese English Dictionary, Shanghai Jiaotong University Press

symptoms. Mental illness as a political tool is described in Foucault's (1989 (1961) 'Madness and Civilisation' where he shows how social forces define madness in order to create legal pathways to confine people who were displaying deviant behaviours to the margin of society. This ancient mechanism is still in use in China and deeply ingrained in activists understanding of contentious politics.

Xiaoming, for instance, a third-year student of Water Management, explained to me that in her opinion an '*average person*' (*yi ban de ren*) could not transform society; you can only do your bit. Doing anything drastic only ever led to chaos and only '*stupid people'* acted like this. She cited the recent anti-Japanese student protests in Beijing as an example: '*They wanted to protest against the Japanese so they destroyed Japanese cars! Japanese cars owned by CHINESE people! It makes no sense!*'. Students are well aware that the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Protests but also contemporary protests are associated with *luan*. They object to it out of mixture of fear for themselves and a belief that former protests have shown that they do indeed only lead to chaos and not to progress. This aversion to protest action as *luan* was expressed not only in relation to far away Arab countries but also to mass incidents involving their own peers like the anti-Japan protests by fellow students as well as large scale labour or even environmental protests. Both Yingqi and Xiaohui echoed similar sentiments about protests as diverse as students anti-Japan and labour protests, stating that they did not see the point of protests as they just '*cause interruptions*' and as Xiaohui said:

> *These people (that protest) do not solve the problems, they just look for something to do to express their anger but that's all they are doing, they want to find a way to express their anger but they are not really doing anything to solve the problem.*

Similar sentiments were voiced when I caught up with Xiaohui and Yingqi on Skype and Wechat[15] after the Umbrella revolution, when they cautioned me to '*use my own mind*' (Xiaohui) when judging what these students were doing and not just believe that they were truly fighting for democracy. To Yingqi's mind especially, what these students were doing was just another example of unnecessary disturbance that would lead nowhere.

Whether students and ENGO members do or do not actively support the current system by say, joining the party of CYL, they are accepting of the party line on the issues that they are campaigning on to avoid contention – which they equate with chaos *and* inevitable suppression. This mixture of being controlled and controlling themselves out of an aversion to chaos and fear of the consequences is also evident in students' use of media. Whilst Biekhart and Fowler (2013) stress the important role of technology and social media in youth activism, the role of media in informing political values and activism in China is much less straightforward.

In order to determine whether students generally know how to get around Internet censorship I asked to connect with them over Facebook, which is censored in China. Most of them said they would be happy to but that they do not normally use it because it is too slow. That is, they know how to use the technologies necessary to avoid censorship but the process is tiresome and frustrating. This is particularly interesting in light of Biekart and Fowlers assertion of the role that advances in technology and the 'global information flow' plays in forming activists' opinions. Young people are also keenly aware that the Internet is censored and monitored by the government. After I left Beijing in December 2013 Yingqi and I were in touch over Skype and Wechat. When he tried to reach me on Skype and wanted my opinion on certain subjects that may have been deemed controversial (such as democracy, the Arab

[15] Chinese online messaging service simliar to Whatsapp.

Spring or Tiananmen) he would put these terms and whole sentences using breaks, mistakes and full stops between them. When I asked why he was doing this he replied in English: '*About the problem of re,vol,uti,on or ref,orm , I don't wanna talk too much here online*'. Such creative use of language to get around Internet censorship extends to the Chinese language as well. A particularly prominent example was the widespread use of the word 'river crab' (hexie), which although the tones are different, sounds similar to the word 'harmonious' (also: hexie). River crab became a pun at the idea of the 'harmonious' society that President Hu Jintao had called for at the beginning of his presidency and whenever a news item online had been censored, a blogger had been silenced or a website taken down, netizens wrote that they had been 'rivercrabbed' meaning censored for the sake of 'harmony'. In 2013, as Xi Jinping, officially took over the presidency, netizen began discussing the president by talking about 'no 11', since 'Xi' could be read like the Roman numerical for 11, once again circumventing censorship for a while. Tang and Huhe (2014) point out that the Internet in China allows for a new political discourse due to:

> The active role of web users in framing news events. Through online comments, blog posts, forum discussions and other interactive features of the Internet, dissident opinion leaders and, more often, ordinary web users have gained venues to express their views on news events and issues. (Tang and Huhe, 2014:560)

My research confirms that such political discourse exists and student are aware of it, that youth in China are getting creative in their use of new technologies and aware of possibilities to express themselves through these. However, the Internet and their use of it are nonetheless subject to strict and far-reaching controls that significantly impact the role media can play in forming activism. Censorship continues to impact young people's relationship to these new technological possibilities: Wenzhao, Yingqi's peer at Jiaotong, was particularly disillusioned

with the liberating powers of the Internet and explained that, in his opinion, in China, the government and the media are collaborating to make sure that environmentalist voices are not heard. On campus he added this type of repression came through the CYL and, therefore, similarly to Yingqi, he felt that their efforts on campus were severely limited in their impact. Wenzhao also felt however that since now more and more people had access to the Internet and streaming websites, this allowed for environmental documentaries to be distributed much more broadly and cheaply than ever before. Yingqi also saw the Internet as an opportunity to spread knowledge, if used correctly. His plan was to create an online space, a website similar to Facebook, that would be filled with profiles and show networks between important historical and political figures to make that sort of knowledge accessible and fun for his peers: '*I want everyone to know who Abraham Lincoln was'*. The fact that the Internet allowed him to spread such knowledge - even if it had to stay within party approved lines - seemed to offer in his mind an opportunity to change society towards becoming more informed and knowledgeable.

On the issue of social media sites like Weibo however a number of students pointed out that there was no way of knowing whether or not information on there was accurate either. As one student put it:

> *There are many people out there who just want attention, so they write about an 'sensitive' (mingan)[16] topic to get this attention. But often it turns out to be a hoax. So you really never know what you can and cannot believe.*

[16] The direct translation for 'mingan' (敏感) is '*sensitive*', however, it implies '*politically sensitive*' in relation to news items or politics.

Therefore, information on the Internet is generally seen as possibly unreliable or false, whether it is from netizen who dare to criticise politics or from official party sources. Activisms 2010+ literature asserts that youth activists now ‘‘a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media, and by a common set of rights-based demands’ (Glasius and Pleyer, 2013: 534). Evidence shows however that Chinese youths relationship to new media is by no means this straightforward, partly due to Internet censorship and partly due to these young people’s aversion to *luan* and objection to people ‘*just wanting attention*’. Both in their offline activism and use of online sources for information there is a constant tension between young people’s ambitions, their aversion to ‘*luan*’, and the restrictions put on them through party control and censorship.

Fragmented activism

Repressed activism, regime supporters or simply not that easy?

How might we be able to analytically frame the collaboration of anti-regime minded and somewhat cynical youth such as Xiaohui and Wenzhao, pragmatists like Yingqi and Wenli and CCP supporters such as Wangcheng? Having outlined both the fundamentally different types of background and politics of students active in SEA and ENGO work as well as their common association of protests as ‘chaotic’, I suggest we consider this grouping together of young people under the banner of environmental activism as ‘fragmented activism’. I use the word ‘fragmented activism’ to analytically capture both the fact that students involved in environmental activism come from very different backgrounds and with widely different political views and yet fundamentally agree on one basic rule of activism: it must not be contentious and lead to chaos in any way.

Whilst some students are simply supporters of the CCP and wish to reap the benefits of an alliance with these powers, others are against chaos because they do not think it would bring the future for China that they envision. Rather they believe contentious politics and protests would lead to chaos or harsh repression by the regime. Whilst this allows us to identify the lack of protests as an overarching characteristic of young people's activism this does not signal a clear political value set. Students who oppose protest are not necessarily supporters of the CCP, neither it is entirely clear whether they are against protests out of fear of the authorities, out the impression that the country is not be ready for fundamental changes, or for lack of a clear political aim.

Biekhart and Fowler describe very different types of youth activism, from Occupy style protests to the uprisings on Tahrir square and yet they suggest there are commonalities between these youth protest that suggest the rise of new, *global generation of activists*. One of their working propositions for debates on Activisms 2010+ is that 'repertoires of contemporary activisms articulate a scale of disaffection and/or disillusionment with the prevailing order that cannot be bought off or 'cost-effectively' coerced into compliance' (Biekart and Fowler, 2013: 535). Research for this paper cannot substantiate this statement. My research suggests that the students in question are of course to some degree coerced into compliance. Nevertheless they are also censoring themselves by trying to take into account the long-term results of revolting against the current order. They all come to the conclusion that open protest action is not only dangerous but also an ineffective means, and potentially harmful rather than beneficial, for their country. This line of thinking reflects a deep antipathy to social disorder and anything *luan,* but should not be mistaken for unquestioning acceptance of party propaganda.

The young activists I interviewed in Beijing differed starkly in their views and values from those described by Biekart and Fowler (2013). The 'globally-shared value set' that Glasius and Pleyers (2013) ascribe to activists all over the world clearly does not appeal to these young Chinese. On the issue of democratic values, for instance, students confirmed that they wanted democracy for their country, but they also clarified that they did not idealise it. They saw flaws in Western democratic systems, such as vote-rigging, corruption and slow decision-making, and they outright rejected a transition to a democratic system in the near future as a remedy for China's problems. Rather, they considered this transition to be dangerous to stability. Daly makes a similar observation in her work on women's activism in Egypt and notes that for Egyptian youth 'global aspirations are significant (…) but so are local realities' (Daly, 2010: 71). In the same vein, those that did not express any political concern and considered the government ultimately responsible for protecting the environment also expressed their desire to care for something beyond themselves, to '*do something for society'* or '*protect nature*'. Although this may not reflect the rights-based demands that we find in activism across Europe or the Americas it should not be left out of the debate. At first sight these findings thus seem to resonate with scholarship on youth agency and activism that argue for a context-based evaluation of activism and new interpretations of agency that move beyond 'agency as resistance' and allow for alternative forms of activism and agency in line with works in this field by Mahmood (2005), Daly (2010) and Dyson (2014).

On her work on 'active quiescence' in Indian youth, Jane Dyson (2014) points out that youth may choose to abide by given rules and power structures because they consider this the best way to achieve their aims. Yet, scholarship arguing for a redefinition of our understandings of activism and agency away from a Western ideal of activism as resistance essentially falls victim to similar weaknesses of the 'Western' ideas that they aim to critique. By ascribing a value set to activism and agency characterised by different ideas of freedom (Mahmood,

2005; Daly, 2010) they are again assuming a homogenous value set underlying the actions of groups of young people that it is unlikely to reflect the nuances and diversity in views of young activists. Given that all students I met during my research - those opposed to the regime as well as those supporting it - rejected any form of protest action against it, it could it be argued that that we are seeing in Beijing is the sort of 'active quiescence' that Dyson (2014) put forward - that is, an 'active' decision not to protest the given order, as this is seen as the best way to advance ones aims. But how can we, as researchers, truly know whether an act of quiescence is born out of an 'active' decision (which assumes a potential and dismissal of resistance) or an inherent fear of the consequences of resistance that leads actors to dismiss this option?

Xiaohui, for instance kept reaffirming to me her objection to acts of protest and *luan.* However, she also expressed anger at being monitored, as well as sadness and confusion about the current state of society. She said that:

> *Us Chinese students, we are confused to the bottom of our hearts. We don't know what to believe in, we never know whether we have enough information. When we do want to protest against something we are worried that someone will come and tell us: you are wrong, you didn't get all the information you need.*

All students I met thought protest action to be objectionable, yet their similarities in view points often end there. From regime supports like the young CYL member from Beikeda, to students like Xiaohui and Wenli, who object to the regime but see institutionalised environmental campaigning within their university as the best way to further their cause, to students like Yingqi who ended up rejecting all institutional structures as well as ENGO work, all these young people were united, for a time, in participating in environmental

activism. Yet, these students, although united in their wish to participate in the greening of their country, differ starkly in their motivations to do so, and build a united front only in actions, and only temporarily, but not in thoughts and points of view. To capture this diversity of views and various responses to political system in Chinese youth I therefore suggest the notion of 'fragmented activism'. By employing this term I aim to capture both the unity of actions that leads to organised activism such as the SEA and ENGO action these young people take part in in and, at the same time, acknowledge the vastly different aims, motivations and durations of their engagements by calling this activism 'fragmented'. It is fragmented both in terms of aims and values underlying environmental action on the part of youth, as well as in long-term unity and strategy.

Mahmood (2005) and Daly (2010) stress that we need to allow for the fact that young people in different countries and different socio-historic contexts may also have different ideas of freedom if we wish to gain a more complete picture of the state of youth activism around the world. It is in fact important to realise that these youths seemingly univocal acceptance of the party line cannot not simply be dismissed as the result of propaganda. Such an explanation would imply that students believe the government to be 'good' and 'truthful'. That however, is not the case. Students freely admitted that they knew government members to be corrupt. Students felt free to laugh about the party in front of their peers, and criticise the CCPs inability or lack of willingness to respond to citizens concerns. They are also united in their aversion to chaos and protest. Yet, again, political values and individual feelings of liberty start to fragment there. Whilst some students like Wangcheng and his fellow CYL members see the party and institutional politics as a desirable career path and the ideal vehicle to solve not only environmental but also political issues, students such as Wenli, Xiaohui and Yingqi deeply oppose the given structures and do not see the party as the legitimate or benevolent ruler it aims to portray itself as.

The lack of contentious political action does not sign-post an apolitical generation. Yet the spectrum of commitment amongst activist groups is vast and cannot be satisfactorily captured by current labels of youth activism and agency. It is tempting to find such labels, they seem to allow us to group young people and compare them across nations and continents, but they risk cloaking more than they reveal and their analytical currency is lost on closer inspection. In this paper I have argued that attempts to summarise youth agency and activism under concepts such as 'Activisms 2010+' or 'active quiescence' do not do the diversity within activists and youth groups justice and assume homogeneity and duration of value sets that cannot be substantiated by this research. To capture the engagement of Chinese students in environmental politics I therefore propose 'fragmented activism' as concept that captures both a common course of action and the broad spectrum of political values underlying it.

Chinese lungs: how Chinese university students negotiate environmental health risks and plans for the future in polluted environments.

ABSTRACT

In this article I put forward 'relational space' (Massey, 2005) as a crucial additional lens through which social scientists can productively explore people's response to environmental health risks. By exploring how young environmental activists in Beijing respond to the health risks associated with air pollution I show how polluted space is perceived and negotiated. I argue that economic uncertainties and pressure to secure a financial future lead students to try to ignore the risks posed by air pollution. Instead, such types of environmental pollution are framed as signposts of economic development, and the risks associated with exposure are marginalised in both their activism and everyday behaviour. Crucially, for '*polluted space*' to become '*developed space*', Chinese youth also assign qualities to their bodies in comparison to other groups (such as foreigners, the elderly and children) that allow them reduce their fear of exposure. I argue that the main coping mechanisms with regard to air pollution are discursive practices, rather than embodied ones, and show that these discursive practices result from the interrelation between students' personal ambitions for economic security, and the narrative they attach to Beijing as a space of opportunity.

KEYWORDS: Environmental health, economic uncertainty, risk, space, body, youth, China

Airpocalypse

In February 2015, the documentary ‘Under the Dome’ by Chai Jing, former journalist at China’s national television service, was published through the website of various Chinese news outlets, including the state run ‘People’s Daily’. The documentary outlined the drastic extent of China’s air pollution problem and its effect on citizens’ health, and it went viral within hours – an estimated 150 million people saw it in China alone. In it, Chai Jing details the story of her own daughter, who suffered severe health problems from air pollution, and weaves together personal stories like this one with scientific evidence about health risks associated with pollution. After initial endorsement by the government, and praise from the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the video was censored, and coverage of the subject forbidden. Since March 2015 the video is no longer available within mainland China.

In recent years, air pollution in China, and in Beijing in particular, has made the news both in and outside the country with headlines like ‘Chinese struggle through 'airpocalypse' smog’ (Kaiman, 2013) or ‘Beijing’s Air Quality Tops ‘Crazy Bad’’(Wong, 2013). After a particularly smoggy January in 2013, even state run newspapers like the People’s Daily and the Global Times published pieces that acknowledged the severity of the problem and called on the government to increase their efforts to curb pollution. During fieldwork for this paper, particulate matter pollution in the capital became a topic of conversation amongst Beijingers. It became increasingly common to see people trying to protect themselves with face masks and air filters, or simply by remaining indoors on particularly polluted days – yet, the young environmentalists my research was focused on continued to reject such measures and marginalised air pollution in their environmental campaigning.

‘Particulate air pollution refers to an air suspended mixture of solid and liquid particles that vary in size, composition and origin’ (Pope, 2000: 713). Particles most commonly associated

with health risks such as lung cancer, pulmonary heart disease and various other ailments are particulate matter (PM) with diameter of less than 10 μm (PM_{10}) and particulate matter of less than 2·5 μm ($PM_{2·5}$). $PM_{2·5}$ are called fine particulate matter and are particularly harmful as their small size allows them to penetrate deep into the lungs. Studies have shown that exposure to fine particulate matter:

> Causes about 3% of mortality from cardiopulmonary disease, about 5% of mortality from cancer of the trachea, bronchus, and lung, and about 1% of mortality from acute respiratory infections in children under 5 years, worldwide. This amounts to about 0.8 million (1.2%) premature deaths and 6.4 million (0.5%) years of life lost (YLL). This burden occurs predominantly in developing countries; 65% in Asia alone. (Cohen et al., 2005:1301)

According to Sun et al. (2004), the main sources of PM air pollution in Beijing are coal burning, traffic exhausts as well as long-range transported dust from industrial areas around Beijing. Whilst the effect of PM air pollution grows increasingly more harmful to humans as density of pollutants and length of exposure increases, even short-term exposure has been shown to be associated with increased respiratory and cardiovascular disease (Pope III, 2000). In a two year long study of 40 healthy university students, who had moved to Beijing at the outset of the study, researchers detected a relationship between short term exposure to PM air pollution, and an increase in oxidative stress associated with arteriosclerotic vascular disease (Wu et al., 2015).

In this paper I argue that despite scientific evidence, and widespread knowledge of the adverse effects of air pollution, bodily risks associated with exposure continue to be

marginalised in both official propaganda and individualised discursive and physical practices by Chinese youth. Through the example of college students in Beijing, I show that young people renegotiate 'polluted space' as 'developed space' through discursive practices, and rhetorically assign qualities to their body that reduce their fear of exposure. Faced with increasing economic uncertainty, students desire for a career in the capital overrides fear of pollution. Instead they attach a narrative to this urban space as a space of development, turning pollution into signifier of development, and as such a signifier of opportunity. In order to deal with the scientific knowledge students have about the adverse effects of air pollution on bodily health, they develop a discourse about 'Chinese lungs' and their bodies as 'being used to it'. Through rhetoric they redefine both their own bodies and the space around them. These coping mechanisms, however, exacerbate the risk they are exposed to. Instead of managing air pollution and reducing constant exposure, they aim to not think about it at all, and reject embodied measures of protection such as face masks. This approach towards air pollution is reflected not only in their day-to-day behavioural norms, but also affects how air pollution features in environmental campaigning. Through this article I put forward 'relational space' as a crucial additional lens through which social scientists can productively explore people's responses to environmental health risks.

Environmental health

Environmental health risks can come in the form of occupational health risks, and more generalised environmental risks posed by the pollution of air, water or food. Interest in how people balance economic development and health risks has become a focus of researchers working on developing countries, where health hazards posed by occupations as well as generalised risks tend to be significantly higher than in the developed world. The World Health Organisation estimates the resulting impacts to 'cause about 25% of death and disease

globally, reaching nearly 35% in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa. This includes environmental hazards in the work, home and broader community/living environment' (WHO, 2016). After the first Beijing 'airpocalypse' in 2013, during my fieldwork in the city, I began to notice how students I was interviewing always linked the bad air to economic development, and asserted their ability to cope. Xuewen, the head of one of the environmental student associations I was researching, once laughed at my face mask, beat his chest, and explained to me that he did not need one, as his 'Chinese lungs' can handle it. Later in the interview, he conceded that yes, air pollution is 'not good', but that it was only there because Beijing was developing, like London in the 1950s, into a prosperous city.

Literature on environmental health in developing countries has shown that, under conditions of economic uncertainty, people may come to accept environmental or occupational risks to their bodily health for economic gain. Writing about occupational health risks in a diamond cutting factory in India, Cross (2010) shows how the multiple forces (global competition, managerial codes of conduct, economic uncertainty), and sources of information (biomedical and scientific accounts as well as personal relationships and lived experiences), all combine to shape workers' evaluation of risk. He draws on Waldman's (2007) work on Asbestos risks in South-Africa, that describes how scientific evaluations of risks and local interpretations, rooted in personal experiences, identities and relationships can coexist and intertwine. Waldman traces how citizens interpret the risks of exposure to asbestos, and suggests that 'local understandings of risk and harm reflect a messy process of convergence and divergence, in which risk and harm are interpreted through the lenses of personal bodily experience and social relationships of dependence' (Waldman, 2007: 9). Cross takes this argument further to suggest that 'notions of risk that circulate around a global factory are not just informed by "past experience, social relations, or personal emotions", as Waldman and

Michael put it, but take shape through relations that are fundamentally shaped by power and political economy' (Cross, 2010: 236).

Such findings are echoed in research on China, where, for instance, Lora-Wainwright (2013), traces how citizens in rural China come to accept chemical pollution of the natural environment, and resultant health risks, as a side effect of development. Lora-Wainwright's (2013) work shows that whilst villagers are aware of the risks posed by pollution, they feel powerless to oppose it, and instead try to protect their health with individualised strategies that are severely limited in their effectiveness. Tilt's (2013) work on industrial pollution confirms Lora-Wainwright's findings, and asserts that individualisation of risk is an increasingly common coping strategy for environmental health risks in China. In examining occupational disease in several Chinese provinces, Ho (2014) suggests that not only do citizens come to accept health risk in the face of economic uncertainty, he also shows that workers who suffer from occupational diseases are marginalised both by the state and society, and become 'taboo people' instead of victims. He argues that, under the state-promoted discourses of citizen 'quality' (suzhi), 'to suffer from an incurable occupational disease would not only manifest in a physical trait, but also infer a moral inferiority in the victim's body' (Ho, 2014:816).

I build on the studies above to analyse how students come to assess risks posed by pollution. However in examining how students at university in Beijing respond to the exposure to toxic levels of air pollution I suggest the notion of relational space (Massey, 2005, Harvey, 2004) as an important analytical lens to grasp the relationship between polluted space and the body. I trace how students relate to the urban space around them, and show how in their minds a '*polluted space*' becomes '*developed space*'. This paper argues that under economic pressure, citizens do not only come to accept pollution as a necessary side-effect of development, but

reframe pollution as a *sign of development*. I show also that the interplay between space and the body impacts on how these young people assess the risk in the space around them, and their own bodies' ability to cope. By circulating discourses about air pollution based on the idea of '*being used to it'* and having '*Chinese lungs*', Beijing students relate to the space around them by redefining 'polluted space' as 'developed space', and through marginalising the risks of particulate air pollution in narratives about their own – young and healthy – bodies.

This renegotiation of pollution as a marker of development, and their bodies as able to cope, leads young people to exacerbate the health risk to their bodies as they reject measures to protect themselves from exposure, and instead develop narratives about their bodies, that frame their bodies as able to cope with the health hazards posed by pollution.

Polluted space and Chinese lungs

There is a rich geographic tradition theorising space, and many different conceptualisations of it that seek to capture the idea that space is not a static backdrop, or container for action, but something that is enrolled in people's lives, shapes them and is shaped by them. Harvey (2004), for instance, combines his own tripartite concept of space with Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) conceptualisation by designing a three by three matrix capturing manifold variants of space. He warns against any rigid rules for the theorisation of space and points to the dialectical relationship between different categories of space to explain the necessity to remain flexible in approaching its definition. Massey (2005) also points out that scholars cannot satisfactorily theorise space and argues that particularly for the purpose of political and social analysis 'there are no such rules, in the sense of a universal politics of abstract spatial forms: of topographic categories. Rather, there are spatialised social practices and relations,

and social power' (Massey, 2005: 166). For the purpose of this paper, it is useful to consider space as 'relational' (Harvey, 2004; Massey, 2005). This idea aims to capture 'space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions' (Massey, 2005: 166), where space is 'made' by people and their social practices, and in turn influences people's social practices. It is with this conceptualisation of space in mind that this paper will discuss the relationship between polluted spaces and bodies that shape students' environmental activism and life plans.

In the following sections I show how, in the case of Beijing, students try to renegotiate 'polluted space' as 'developed space', and thereby learn to accept the risk to their bodily health as inevitable. Their main strategy to 'manage pollution' is the discursive practice, through which they redefine both the space around them, and the relationship between this space and their own body. I argue that their narrative of Beijing as 'the city of opportunity', and their bodies as having 'Chinese lungs', results in a renegotiation of their surrounding space as 'developed' rather than 'polluted'. I also show that the ability of their bodies to 'cope' is constructed in direct relation to the space around them and reflects the interplay between students' plans for the future and the – polluted – space in which they aim to realise these plans.

Research focus

For this research I interviewed 50 students and young professionals in Beijing, China. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and complemented by participant observation, 'hanging out time' and informal chats as well as pictorial evidence. Out of the 50 respondents, 35 were students who were reading for an undergraduate degree at a university in Beijing, or visiting Beijing for an internship as part of their university degree somewhere

else. I interviewed students from all years (1–3 or, for some degrees, 1–4). All students were enrolled in either a campus-based environmental association or they were working for environmental NGOs (ENGOs) around the city. I also interviewed their bosses and colleagues at these ENGOs and teachers.

With the exception of 5 of them, all students and young professionals were only children, and about 40 of them had moved to Beijing from another city. Most students were enrolled at either the Beijing Forestry University or the Beijing Jiaotong University. Degrees read included, but were not limited to: Transport Studies, Logistics, Information Technology, Forest Management, Engineering, Environmental Engineering, Wood Science, Social Studies, Media and Languages. I always started interviewing them about their interest in the environment to give us something to talk about, and then proceeded to ask them about their home, their parents, their experiences of growing up and education, their experiences of university, their friends and their plans for the future. Some I interviewed repeatedly, collected pictures and anecdotes of their lives, and 'hung out' with them socially. I aimed to get a detailed a picture of their day-to-day lives, and stayed in touch after I left to follow up on some of the things they had said, plans they had mentioned and problems they were facing.

Participants were chosen on the basis of their affiliation with environmental protection organisations, either at university or in the form of environmental non-governmental organisations. Interest in this focus group arose from the rapid increase in environmental protests in China over the past decade, and the curiosity to find out how the current generation of Chinese students is responding to the degradation of the natural environment around them. Researching student environmental associations and environmental NGOs is a particularly interesting field of study, in exploring the lives of today's Chinese youth because they are the first generation to grow up with severe environmental pollution, as well as accessible

knowledge about the detrimental health effects of air, soil and water pollution on their future lives. I set out to investigate how exposure to environmental risks, and environmental activism impacts young people's beliefs and value systems, particularly in relation to future job aspirations and their environmental activism.

Economic uncertainty

Today's Chinese youth face intense competition for graduate jobs (Liu, J., 2006: 161), a lack of social security and financial responsibility for their parents later in life (Liu, F., 2006). When entering university, students are faced with the pressure of having to succeed academically outside the schooling and parenting system they are used to, and with little hope of finding employment effortlessly upon graduation (Schucher, 2014). The majority of students come from one-child families, and often have to move far from home to attend university. The development of the domestic economy can create and eradicate job prospects in the space of a year, leaving once-hopeful candidates suddenly without prospects (Bradsher and Wong, 2013). Stress levels amongst students have become the subject of academic debate (Chen et al., 2009) as suicide rates amongst university students have risen over the past decade (Li, 2012). In 2013 a university in Guangdong infamously asked incoming students to sign a 'suicide waver' upon their entry into university (Jiang, 2013). Liu (2006) asserts that:

> [c]ollege life, though lasting only a few years, exerts far-reaching influence on [young people's] lives for it concentrates all their energies and their most enthusiastic years. (…) [Their] college years remain, forever, the most moving chapter in their lives. (Liu, J., 2006: 145)

When entering university, educational requirements of the various degrees are an obvious source of pressure. In the case of university students in Beijing this is, however, amplified by a variety of other factors such as the student's change in residence and lack of family network in Beijing. The majority of students I interviewed were only children, and not originally from Beijing. For the duration of their degree, they were required to live in dormitory rooms of between four and eight people. Some told me about their homesickness, others reported that the studying pressure was getting to them, that there was '*so much information at once'* and that they had not really found their bearings yet. The second and third years were stressed about their workload and exams. Some found living in dormitories difficult, since they had to share their life with people they hardly knew and, sometimes, did not like. I found evidence of the sort of parental pressure described in Fong's (2004) work on youth in China entitled 'Only Hope', as a number of students felt responsible for their parents, and pressured to be worthy of the financial investments made for their education.

At the time of my fieldwork the economic situation for university graduates was becoming continuously worse. According to research conducted by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, graduates make up approximately 50% of young people entering the labour market in China every year (Schucher, 2014: 40). The report also states, however, that:

> The country's tertiary education sector has expanded far more rapidly than its economy has. State sector employment has been diminishing since the middle of the 1980s, while the expectations of graduates who invested large sums of family income into their education have remained quite high. Consequently, unemployment rates grow with the level of education. (Schucher, 2014: 23)

In 2013, seven million university students graduated in China joining a pool of college graduates that earn less than migrant workers, characterised as 'educated underemployment' (Huang, 2015: 240).

When I asked students why they had chosen their course, they cited their *gaokao* results as the main reason; whether they enjoyed their course, as well as the resultant job prospects, was cited to be largely irrelevant. It was explained to me, that during their high school years, there had simply not been time to think about what they enjoyed and that, due to the economic situation, you could not afford to *baixue*, that is, waste what you have learnt. There were exceptions to this rule of course, but it applied to the overwhelming majority. Whilst the social backgrounds of the students I interviewed varied, from working class backgrounds, to sons and daughters of successful business men or party cadres, their ambitions for their future were remarkably similar in one respect: economic security. Xuewen, a second year student of Computer Studies, from Jiaotong University explained his and his peers anxiety about *baixue* to me like this: '*Look, in the West maybe a hundred people apply for job, here it will be a few thousand people!*'. One of the most decisive factors in choosing applying for their respective universities was their location: Beijing. '*Everyone wants to go to University in Beijing*', I was frequently told when I asked why the students had chosen to study so far from home. With the exception of only one student, all of them hoped to be able to stay in Beijing, and find work there. Although the process of finding work in Beijing is made difficult for non-residents who are registered in another province, students still felt their chances of finding a company that would help them receive a Beijing registration[17] were much higher if they were already there. Beijing, they said, was the city of opportunities. It is where one could, '*develop oneself*' and '*continuously improve*' one's prospects.

[17] In China, the "Household registration system' or Hukou-system is meant to regulate where citizen are allowed to settle, work, attend school and receive their pensions. For students who are not originally from Beijing this means they have to find a company that is willing to support their Beijing Hukou application.

When I asked them what they wished for, students said that they were hoping that one day the pressure would lessen and that they would be allowed to decide for themselves how to spend their time. A young man at Jiaotong University said:

> *When I graduate I must first find a job, then I won't have any time and I won't have money but I think maybe... maybe in five years I will be in a position to travel. That would be really nice.*

Two young men at the Forestry University echoed this and said: '*I want to be a ziyouren (自由人)' – a free person.* The most frequently voiced aims after graduation were economic independence, to own a flat and a car. Xuewen explained to me '*us Chinese, we don't feel safe renting. We want to own a flat*'. Later, he added that if you want to get married, you have to have your own flat, and everyone wants to live in Beijing, so its very difficult to afford a flat there, but that he still wanted to try.

Faced with economic pressure, and competition by an increasing pool of graduates, and decreasing job prospects across China, as well as societal and/or parental expectations not to 'baixue' (waste what you have learned), students' wish for a career in the first-tier city Beijing remains a vital component of how youth respond to environmental health risks posed by air pollution. As a third year at Beijing Forestry said about his peers: '*it's a question of priorities, they just can't care about their health, they think they need to get to the top*'.

What Xuewen and his peers explained about their future plans captures several essential principles guiding how students perceive the space around them: Becoming free to fulfil their dreams is intimately tied with security, first economic security in form of a job, which then in turn affords you the ability to own your own flat and car, which both also represent economic

stability and security. This desire for security is fed by a multitude of uncertainties students are faced with in Beijing; navigating a new city by themselves, adjusting to live in university and dealing with exam pressure, only to be faced with decreasing job prospects, and rising house prices upon graduation. Feeling secure essentially means to be free of economic worries or uncertainties. It is in Beijing that students believe the opportunities for economic development and security to lie, and it is in Beijing where they wish to settle down, to own a flat and a car. Air pollution, therefore, is something that has to fit into this perception of Beijing and their own goals. It is a concern that has to be made acceptable. This is achieved by discursive negotiation of the relationship between the space around them and their own bodies – the attribution to themselves of '*Chinese lungs*'.

Massey writes that '[s]pace ,as relational, and as the sphere of multiplicity, is both an essential part of the character of, and perpetually reconfigured through, political engagement. And the way in which that spatiality is imagined by the participants is also crucial' (Massey, 2005: 183). Beijing is imagined by students as the 'city of opportunity' – and the smog the city is clouded in is reconfigured as a further sign of opportunity and development. However, as I will evidence in the next section, this perception of the space around them is also driven by state discourse, that try to portray 'smog' as 'fog', supports the idea that smog is an inevitable side product of development, and censors information which does not toe the party line. State discourse continues to try and manipulate citizens' perception of the space they live in, by marginalising the health risks associated with pollution, and instead emphasising the work that is being done to curb pollution. As such air pollution becomes the seemingly inevitable price citizens pay for a better future.

Beijing – the 'foggy' city of opportunities

Beijing is frequently ranked as one of the most polluted cities in the world (Wu et al., 2015). Whilst levels of air pollution can change rapidly depending on weather conditions, winter and summer months are commonly the most polluted likely due to increasing emissions from coal fired power plants to provide heat or electricity for air conditioning (WSJ, 2014). The Beijing government attempted to deny the severity of the problem for a long time, publishing only the less worrisome PM10 readings and continuously claiming that what residents were experiencing was only mild pollution, and the main problem was 'heavy fog' (Jianyu, 2011). The city's air pollution made particularly gruesome headlines during my fieldwork in 2013, when media were reporting the worst level of air pollutants recorded in the city, dubbed the 'Airpocalypse'. The American embassy started publishing hourly air pollution levels of fine particles (PM2.5) in 2008. This Air Quality Index (AQI) measures PM 2.5 concentration in micrograms per cubic meter, $\mu g/m^{3,}$ and an evaluation of data collected since 2008 showed an average of about 100 micrograms per cubic meter, about six times the amount deemed safe by U.S. Environmental Protection bureau (Wang et al., 2013). The embassy's AQI readings literally went off the charts in early January 2013 - the reading normally maxes out at 500, on January 12th 2013 the reading passed 800. After the so-called Airpocalypse, the local government's approach changed towards an acknowledgement of the problem, and health warnings issued to Beijing residents on particularly polluted days (Anderlini, 2013; Wong, 2013). Yet the documentary 'Under the Dome' was censored within days, suggesting officials wish to retain the power to explain to citizens whether or not, when, and to what degree they ought to worry about the pollution around them.

How the government aims to filter knowledge that circulates in the public realm is particularly evident in the material they make available to student environmental associations.

Student awareness campaigns on air pollution consisted of 8 circa one square meter large boards, popped up against the wall of the university canteen once every half a year. These signs are provided by the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau, and consist of lengthy and highly scientific explanation of how PM2.5 particles can enter the lungs, and what type of industries cause them. Two out of eight signs are dedicated to explaining what air pollution actually means (which chemicals count as pollutants), and what causes them (coal burning, industry and transportation). Of these two lengthy accounts only one sentence mentions that particulate air pollution is dangerous to health, emphasising that the elderly and children are particularly at risk. Measures to protect yourself from pollution were summed up in one short paragraph: avoid exercising in the morning and in the evenings, when particulate air pollution was likely to be particularly high. Instead, try to exercise between 12 pm and 2 pm. The rest of the two boards, which are titled 'Let us reduce air pollution hand in hand', is focused on how citizens can aim to reduce the air pollution they themselves cause, rather than how to protect themselves from it.

The portrayal of air pollution, as an inevitable side effect of developing into a thriving city, is a narrative that also features heavily in government propaganda on the subject, not only in respect to development in Beijing, but, crucially, in comparison to the West. Out of the eight air pollution information boards provided by the Beijing Bureau for Environmental Protection to the air pollution campaign at Jiaotong University, four are dedicated to explaining how the government is tackling the problem, reporting on improvements made in closing down heavily polluting enterprises around Beijing, installing better filters in existing coal plants and investing in alternative sources of energy. A fifth board is dedicated to outlining how other countries have dealt with this problem, essentially chronicling what is portrayed as the very limited progress other nations, EU countries and the US in particular, have made. It begins with stating that air pollution is a global problem that affects, for instance, the United States

and the European Union as well. It then explains that both these unions began economic development a long time ago, and have therefore had to deal with air pollution since the 1940s and 50s. Despite this decisively longer time to deal with the problem, the boards elaborate, the E.U. and the U.S. have only begun to tackle PM2.5 pollution in the last ten years. The very last sentence then informs readers that neither the U.S. or the E.U. have yet managed to meet the standards for clean air set by the World Health Organisations.

This boards sums up essentially how the government wants its citizens to think about air pollution. That is, as something that is not exclusively a Chinese problem, but an inevitable side effect of development, something that citizens of other nations have also had to endure to develop wealthy societies, and that other nations have not been able to control either. The remaining boards outline the measures that the government is already taking to tackle the problem. Such discourse was echoed to me by students who compared Beijing to London in the 1950s, and emphasised that all cities in China that were in the process of development had pollution issues to deal with it.

However, to some degree this effort on part of the government to direct public assessment of risk turns out to be superfluous. Given that the campaign signs had been provided by local government, I assumed that students had not been permitted to make their own. Instead, students told me that they simply did not consider air pollution an interesting campaign topic. Xuewen, one of the organisers of the Jiaotong SEA said to me: '*we need to do things that people are interested in*'. No one, he added, is interested in air pollution, since '*everyone already knows its bad for you*'. Campaigns on the risks of air pollution were seen as futile, for two reasons. Firstly, SEA students believed everyone was already aware that air pollution, and PM 2.5 in particular, is bad for your health, and secondly, it seemed useless to them to campaign on something that they could do nothing about. Measures to reduce pollution are

seen to be government measures, which they, as students, could do nothing about. After 'Under the Dome' was censored in 2015, I contacted Xiaohui, one of the students I had become close to at Beijing Forestry University to ask what she thought of it. She said that many of her peers had seen it but that it '*doesn't really make a difference*' since, in her opinion, everyone already knew that air pollution was dangerous.

How the government filters or censors science in its propaganda and how citizen react to such discourse is similar to observations made by Cross (2010), in his work on occupational health risks in India. He writes that:

> Notions of risk circulated among the managerial and labouring publics in this factory did not interact with science through a benign social and cultural filter, but interacted with science through specific calculations, direct observations, feelings and emotions, relations of power, obligation and dependency and social histories of exclusion and marginality. (Cross, 2010: 228)

The government does not react to potential sources of information such as the scientific documentary 'Under the Dome' in a straightforward way, but rather interacts with such science depending on how it affects the public's opinion. Whilst the government is guided by fears for social stability and their own legitimacy to rule, students in Beijing did not respond to information about air pollution in a straightforward manner either – neither in their attempts to gain such knowledge, nor their assessment of the danger it poses. Both the official municipal readings of PM10 and PM2.5, and, for instance, the American AQI, are easily accessible online, through laptops and via apps on mobile devices. Whilst all students I spoke to owned at least one mobile phone, not a single one of them had downloaded any of available pollution apps or checked the readings online through their laptops or university computers.

High levels of air pollution are easily visible, as it clouds the city in a greyish smog. Both the Beijing Forestry University and Beijing Jiaotong University were shrouded in smog most days of the years. Living in shared dorms of up to eight people, students are exposed to pollution without air filters, day and night. Neither dorms, nor classrooms, canteens or the libraries and sport centres were equipped with air filters. Still students did not wear masks to protect themselves against pollutants, even on days when the smog lay so heavily over the city, it was impossible not to notice. However, this was not based on a belief that what they were experiencing was 'fog'. Official discourse on the subject is only one factor that influences students' assessment of the risk of pollution.

Risk is in the air

Students' assessment of risk is also based on 'specific calculations, direct observations, feelings and emotions' (Cross, 2010: 228). That they are aware of the pollution around them became evident in comments they made about bad smells, dry skin, headaches and tiredness - all symptoms that they attributed to air pollution. However, serious health impacts of air pollution manifest themselves very slowly. The possibility of lung cancer or other, dangerous diseases linked to long-term exposure to air pollution are no direct influence on students response to air pollution and easily negotiated away. One young woman even insisted that her monthly period pains and skin problems had improved since moving to Beijing as a result of air pollution. Again, these results reflect Waldman (2007) and Cross (2010) findings that risk is assessed based on a myriad of discourses both public and private. The knowledge they have through public channels, such as the Ministry of Environmental Protection is assessed in conjunction with personal stories and experiences, even when these may contradict scientific evidence. Scientific evidence about the impact of air pollution is a valued against the perceptible changes to the body, including changes to the positive – such as improved skin.

Whilst students knew about 'PM2.5', that it can penetrate deep into the lung and cause a range of severe illnesses in theory, they judged this knowledge against the fact that they felt 'fine'. The same is true for measures to protect oneself in physical ways, which were only partially based on scientific evidence or official advice. To comfort me, students gave me various pieces of advice on how to shield myself from the adverse effects of pollution. '*Just close your windows on bad days*', and '*buy plants for your room*' were the most frequently voiced ideas. Both these measures were circulating not only on campus but repeated to me by my friends and neighbours. The plants, it was argued, improved air quality by naturally filtering the air and closing the window of course, was meant to keep out the worst of the pollution.

A further piece of information that circulated, both on campus and in official publications, was that air pollution really only affects the very young and very old. There is not a single mention of wearing face masks, or installing air purifiers, on the SEA campaign signs on air pollution and health warnings are expressed in one single sentence, which emphasises the dangers for the elderly and children, leaving the impression that the rest of the population does not need to be too concerned. In my discussions about wearing masks or using air filters, Xuewen, who was in charge of the air pollution campaign on campus told me that I need not be too worried, since us young people would not be as badly affected as children and old people. When I pointed out that even on heavily polluted days, children were playing outside without masks, he said that theoretically, of course, it would be better for the children to stay inside but that this was not really a solution in Beijing, since almost all days were heavily polluted: '*you can't avoid it*', he shrugged.

Waldman (2007) shows that visibility of risk in the space around us is an important factor in assessing risk and harm. In her research, asbestos risk was linked to the visibility of exposed

asbestos fibres, which 'sparked community action and outrage and were seen to be fatal' (Waldman, 2007: 45). In Beijing, the visibility of air pollution is the norm rather than the exception – residents have little leeway to ignore the presence of it in their air. According to the students this visibility actually made their campaigning superfluous, since 'everyone already knows'. This contradiction, between their seeming lack of interest in protecting themselves against exposure, and the lived reality of a smoggy Beijing, was explained to me by Xiaohui when she explained why she would not wear a mask. First she said, I needed to understand that there was nothing they could do about the pollution, since its directly related with Beijing's economic development, and only the government can solve that problem by finding a balance between the economy and pollution. Therefore she continued, if you do not want to breathe the Beijing air, you either had to live in a different city, or constantly wear a mask. When I said, without thinking of the lack of air filters on campus, that you only had to wear the masks outside she laughed and said: '*Where do you think the air is coming from that is inside*?'. From her point of view, the only option to protect yourself really would be to wear a mask almost constantly – instead Xiaohui never wore one at all. Cross' (2010) work shows that in a diamond cutting factory, workers did not wear face masks, despite first demanding them, and suggests there are two possible interpretations of this. First, where the refusal represents an assertion of radical male autonomy vis-a-vis the management. Second, where the refusal is a means by which to express their criticism of the company heads for their general lack of interest in workers' health and welfare. He notes also that 'people complained that the mask restricted the scope for social interaction' (Cross, 2010: 233) and that workers said there was no point to it as the dust was already inside them. Some of my own evidence is similar. Students rejected wearing masks, saying that they were uncomfortable, and that you could not have conversations through them. But there was another element to rejecting the masks that is particular to the problem of air pollution in Beijing – students response to pollution was born out of a feeling that it was futile, not because the particles were already

inside them, but because they would have to wear them all the time, and everywhere, to make them truly effective. Feeling the need to assign themselves lungs that are capable of handling pollution, therefore, is also borne out of a feeling that the masks are *not a realistic measure of protection* in a city that is polluted severely most days of the year.

Wenzhao, a Jiaotong university second year student from Guangxi province, summed up how students end up coming to terms with pollution. He explained to me he was aware of the dangers of air pollution, that he knew the science behind it, but that this problem would not really affect his generation. Instead, coming generations would have to deal with it. Later on in the conversation, and having just asserted that this problem would not affect his generation, he reflected on whether his friends and other students were concerned about the pollution. Musing about it for a little while, and laughing when he came to a conclusion, he suggested that, although all of them are aware of the dangers of constant exposure, students were essentially not '*trying to avoid the problem but trying to avoid the fear of it'*. Since trying to shield themselves from pollution, through masks or air filters, would be an acknowledgement of the severity of the problem, students develop mechanisms that instead allowed them to discursively marginalise the risk.

Students explained to me that '*Chinese lungs are used to it*', and there were endless jokes about foreigners suffering when they came to Beijing because they could not handle the air. This notion of 'Chinese lungs' is revealing about the role of society and culture in an assessment of risk. On the one hand it reflects Ho (2014) findings that a body that is seen as unable to deal with pollution is seen as inferior. Crucially, although students may opt for some embodied ways to protect themselves such as closing their windows on particularly polluted ways their main mechanism to feel protected is to construct discourses around pollution and their own bodies that make the risk acceptable. However, the idea of 'Chinese

lungs' is developed not only as a result of societal expectations as outlined by Ho (2014). Rather, this exceptionality of their bodies is constructed in direct relation to the space around them, and reflects the interplay between students' plans for the future and the – polluted – space in which they aim to realise these plans.

Attending university in Beijing, and making life plans to stay there, essentially means opting for an urban space that has become globally infamous for being clouded in toxic smog on a regular basis. Smog whose larger particles make it visible and cloud buildings that are only twenty feet away from you in a grey haze and, small particles you inhale with every breath you take unless you wear a facemask on the majority of days throughout the year, inside or outside. Truly escaping the Beijing smog is made incredibly difficult, unless you live in a very well insulated apartment and are able to invest in an industrial strength air purifier – something that students cannot afford, and given the economic situation, are unlikely to be able to afford once they are employed. Living in this urban space, for the foreseeable future, means living in polluted space. This is a fact that students are aware of, and it is a fact that must be made 'liveable'. Therefore, instead of '*avoiding the problem*' students develop narratives around pollution that allow them to instead '*avoid the fear of it'*. Thus, paradoxically, they do not attempt to manage their fear by taking measures that would reduce the risk of exposure, such as masks or filters. Instead they integrate air pollution into their narrative of their own bodies as having 'Chinese lungs'.

Therefore, taking further what Waldman (2007), Cross (2010), Lora-Wainwright (2013) and Ho (2014) have found, my data reveals that risk to their body is assessed not only on different types of knowledge, discourse, and influence by various power structures, but that the body itself is assessed in relation to the pollution it is exposed to, and negotiated as a fit companion in this polluted space. Through discourse about their own body as being young, Chinese, and

'used to it', Chinese youth rhetorically mitigate their fear of exposure. In contrast to existing scholarship on environmental health, I suggest that to understand reactions to pollution problems, we should add relational space as an analytical lens through which to understand people's perceptions and coping mechanisms. Considering the interplay between space and the body allows us to understand both how 'polluted' comes to be constructed as 'developed', and why, rather than seeking measures of protection, students come to portray their bodies as able to cope without them.

Polluted space – Developed space

Massey's (2005) idea of relational space allows us to see urban space as something that is made by people, and in turn influences people's behaviour. It is through the interactions between students' life plans in Beijing and the inevitable exposure to pollution in this space, that the urban space around them is defined. Instead of seeing the smog around them as a marker of risk, students define it as a marker of development. Since two of the main sources of particulate pollution are car exhausts and industry, students link air pollution to economic opportunity and development. Wenzhao, who was from studying 'Communication Engineering' at Jiaotong University, explained why air pollution did not bother him that much by comparing Beijing to the small town he had grown up in in Guangxi. In his hometown, and the surrounding countryside, the sky is blue and there is no pollution. This, he said, is the case because his hometown is 'backward', and has not yet developed. Wenzhao felt that the air was polluted in Beijing because pollution is an inevitable side product of development, whereas in his hometown in Guangxi the air is clean, but only because it has not developed economically. The smog around them signified to students like Wenzhao that they had 'made it', that they had managed to move to a developed city, that was not backward, like the

unpolluted countryside, but full of cars, showing the wealth of the Beijingers, and industries promising job prospects.

Time and time again, when I spoke to students about their plans for the future they expressed their hope to find work in the capital. I asked whether, if they had the option to get a well-paid job in a less polluted city, would they move there and avoid the smog? The answer was almost always no. In discussing Beijing in comparison to other cities, I was often reminded that only Beijing and Shanghai were 'first tier' cities. Even cities like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, which are commonly also referred to as 'first tier', were dismissed by students as second best. At the end of the day, the image of Beijing as the city where one could 'develop oneself' was deeply ingrained in students' minds. Massey (2005) suggested that space is 'made' by people and social practices, and in turn influences people's social practices. I argue that this applies also to polluted space, where what counts as 'polluted space', and how this is perceived, is essentially defined by people and social practices. For students who hope to secure a financial future, and build a life in Beijing, polluted 'space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions' (Massey, 2005: 166), becomes a space of modernity, of possible connections and opportunities for 'self-development'.

Chinese lungs

This article has argued that although Chinese students are aware of the health risks posed by particulate matter pollution, these risks are negotiated through two interrelated discursive mechanisms. First, polluted space is constructed as 'developed space' and thus pollution becomes a marker of opportunity and modernity. Second, the body itself is assigned qualities that allow its exposure to health risks such as pollution, based on local narratives of 'insiders' and 'others', where Chinese youth are seen to be equipped to deal with pollution levels that

cannot be tolerated by foreigners, the elderly and children. In this process, Beijing's urban space and the ubiquitous pollution are framed as 'developed' compared to Chinese cities and as 'developing' in comparison to the West. Scientific knowledge of the negative health effects of pollution are filtered through this narrative of the city, and incorporated into this narrative by focusing on particular bits of information like increased health risks for the elderly and infants.

To make this narrative of polluted space possible, the body itself has to be redefined to become a fit companion in this space. Whilst starting from an argument based on similar experiences of air pollution in the West, this narrative does not fully soften fears of adverse health affects. Dry skin, coughs and headaches serve as bodily reminders of the daily risks students are exposed to. Thus, air pollution is discursively negotiated as something that is not only a standard marker of development but something that a young Chinese is particularly well suited to deal with: due to, the *Chinese lung*. In part this reflects Ho's (2014) finding that a body that cannot deal with environmental risks, and develops a disease is seen as inferior and socially unacceptable. 'Chinese lungs', however, is a construct that focuses on the particular ability of young adults' bodies to cope. The vulnerability of those older and younger is not seen as inferiority, but related to their age. Since students cannot fully ignore the adverse effects of air pollution, they tell themselves that 'Chinese lungs are used to it', and that 'air pollution only affects the young and the old', and that it is a problem that 'won't affect this generation'. These beliefs shield them from fears about more severe, long-term health effects.

In her research on pollution victims in rural China, Lora-Wainwright finds that:

> The more visible, positive and quantifiable outcomes of industry (work opportunities

> and compensation) overshadow the much more elusive and potentially contestable effects of pollution on the body, which remain the object of suspicion rather than certainty. (Lora-Wainwright, 2013: 316f.)

The idea of 'Chinese lungs' goes beyond an acceptance of health risk, such as described by Lora-Wainwright (2013). 'Chinese lungs' allows youth to seemingly dissolve the worst of the uncertainty and risk in the space around them. As the most serious health effects of air pollution such as lung cancer, and other forms of pulmonary disease, only develop over long periods of time, the possibility of future disease is negotiated away as something that cannot happen to students' bodies. A body that deals with air pollution, becomes part of the 'self-development' that dictates students' day-to-day life, and allows them to make their way towards becoming free of worries and uncertainty. The space around them is defined in relation to this idea of being free or rather, having the opportunity of being free of economic insecurity. The physical space of polluted environments is seen through a lens of development and opportunity. Ho's (2014) suggestion, that not being able to deal with pollution is a sign of a lack of 'quality', is coupled with a narrative of pollution as a marker of development. As such, pollution pushes students to discursively negotiate the space around them, and their own bodies, in a way that allows them to pursue their plans for the future.

Conclusion

For social scientists interested in people's experience of pollution, the idea of relational space is an instructive lens through with to explore how people may come to accept pollution, and reject measures of protection, despite scientific knowledge and high visibility of the problem. Particular attention should be paid to how people imagine their own body responding to

pollution. As people seeking employment in a polluted space, students imagine both the space they are in to be polluted as a sign of development, and their bodies as able companions in this space, even when this narratives conflicts with scientific knowledge and bodily experiences.

Relational space as described by Massey (2005) and Harvey (2004) allows us to inspect why people's response to urban air pollution is not simply based on scientific fact, and logically following patterns of protection and reduction. Rather, air pollution is politically constructed by myriad voices, both public and private, which shape discourses that marginalise health risks, and portray air pollution as a necessary, temporary side-effect of development. In combination with a climate of economic uncertainty, the government has effectively managed to position itself as the only force responsible for curbing air pollution, and yet not take the associated responsibility of caring for its citizens' health. As such, air pollution is a particularly troublesome example of the incredible influence of state power in the construction of urban space - instead of protecting its citizens from the health risks in the very air around them, they have declared it a matter for the government to solve, and established that to a certain degree, at least, it is an unavoidable by-product of economic development. The emergence of 'Chinese lungs' arises from a feeling of helplessness to oppose pollution, or protect themselves from it as particulate pollution enters all of the students' living space.

By framing air pollution as something their bodies are equipped to manage, and pollution as a sign of development, the risks associated with air pollution are marginalised both in students' everyday behaviour and discourse, as well as in their environmental campaigning. However, the circulation of ideas such as 'Chinese lungs' on Beijing university campuses is relevant not only to our understanding of the relationship between space and the body. It also reveals an enormous pressure that economic uncertainty, and societal expectations, place on this

generation of Chinese university students. Rather than conforming to stereotypes of the 'materialistic me generation' these young people act on the fear of economic uncertainty, and the imperative of constant 'self improvement'. To reduce fears for bodily health, young people develop narratives that construe risks as only affecting other people – the elderly, children or foreigners. As such, 'Chinese lungs' is a coping mechanism that is particular to young people, and shows how fear of economic uncertainty, and societal expectation, can override knowledge of scientific evidence, even for students who are environmentally literate, and theoretically aware of the health risks associated with pollution.

Place and environmentalism: How a focus on the campus shapes environmentalist critique and action amongst university students in Beijing

Abstract

This study explores environmentalism among Beijing's student environmental associations and analyses their focus on the university campus as the centre of their campaign efforts. Through this lens the paper discusses how a focus on place affects environmental critique and action. Studies such as those by Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) on environmentalism in the United States have suggested that a focus on the protection of specific places can lead to a situation where environmental activism effectively fails to address contemporary environmental challenges such as climate change, unsustainable consumption patterns and pollution. Armiero and Sedrez (2014) echo this concern and suggest that modern environmental threats necessitate a 'think globally, act locally' approach to environmentalism as 'nobody and no place can be environmentally safe separated from the whole' (Armiero and Sedrez, 2014: 4). This article outlines how Chinese students' emphasis upon the environmental and social qualities of the university campus shapes the development of environmental critique and campaigning. I argue that the Chinese case highlights the need for a more critical analysis of the inconsistencies undergirding 'place based' environmentalism. I also show that place based environmentalism can serve as a crucial initial step towards the development of basic environmental awareness and can in fact represent a logical response to broader scale issues.

KEYWORDS: place; environmentalism; students; China

Introduction

Recent scholarship on environmentalism is concerned with assessing the effectiveness of place based environmental action in light of increasingly large-scale environmental problems. Armiero and Sedrez (2014), for instance, compare local environmental struggles across the globe to highlight the numerous tensions and contradictions contained within local environmental movements and their complex relationship with global environmental issues. Brown's (2006) work on environmental protests in the Brazilian Amazon emphasises the need to consider both local protests and their connection to global development. These scholars stress the need to 'think globally, act locally', and suggest that a focus on the protection of specific places can render environmental critique and action largely ineffective in dealing with contemporary environmental threats. Smith (2001), in particular, exemplifies this conundrum through a study of the American environmental movement, which – despite its successes in the protection of national parks, forests and wilderness areas – has been unsuccessful in offering effective critique and action aimed at tackling global warming. Smith (2001) and Peterson Del Mar (2012) suggest that it is precisely the focus on the protection of certain 'places' that may hinder the formulation of environmental critique equipped to manage large-scale environmental issues such as climate change.

In countries such as China, place based action is often the only option available to citizens through which anxieties over environmental degradation can be channelled. A recurring theme in studies on environmental protests is their 'highly localised' nature. Much environmental campaigning has been described as 'not-in-my-backyard' (Nimby) action that is aimed less at national environmental sustainability than at the protection of the local environment. Scholarship centred on environmental non-governmental actors also emphasises the political and geographical constraints under which environmental NGOs (ENGOs) operate

(Ho, 2001; Yang, 2005; Schwartz, 2004). ENGOs face severe legal and political restrictions, limiting their ability to address environmental issues on a broader scale. Studies on Nimbys have shown that they are often highly effective in improving environmental governance, as their focus on 'short-term, localised outcomes enables them to adopt more contentious tactics in opposing unpopular projects' (Johnson, 2010: 432). Scholars have also lauded the ability of ENGOs to insert themselves in the political process and to improve channels for public participation in environmental governance, despite the geographical and topical restrictions placed upon them (Ho and Edmonds, 2007; Johnson, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Cooper, 2006). Nevertheless, the scope of environmental activism in China is largely relegated to place based action, suggesting that the Chinese environmental movement may be facing a conundrum similar to that described by scholars of environmental movements elsewhere.

A major constituency of the Chinese environmental movement are student environmental associations (SEA), and students and graduates enrolled in ENGO action (Yang, 2005; Lu, 2003; Wu, 2006). Students involved in environmental associations in Beijing declared a decidedly global approach to their environmentalist agenda, stating that their aims were '*to make the whole world a green family*' (SEA mission, JiaoTong University) and to '*let everything we touch be green*' (SEA mission, Forestry University). Due to university regulations, however, the vast majority of their environmental action and critique has to be focused on their respective campuses. This study explores how this focus on place plays out in students' formulations of environmentalist critique and action. I argue that, contrary to findings on ENGOs, students' place based environmentalism is not solely born of political restrictions. Instead, I suggest that SEA environmentalism reflects the same tendencies in their approach to environmental protection that Smith (2001) observed in his study of the American environmental movement.

Students' discourses and behavioural norms associated with pro-environmental behaviour are tied closely to romanticised ideas of nature, codes of morality and family values, but they largely neglect underlying patterns of consumption and large-scale environmental issues such as air pollution. This article contributes to scholarship on the complex ways in which citizens interpret environmental issues and, at times, learn to 'live with pollution' (Lora-Wainwright, 2013, Lora-Wainwright, 2017).[18] I argue that, although 'place based' environmentalism may fall short of addressing large-scale environmental issues and unsustainable consumption patterns, it serves as an import gateway into environmental activism and provides an educational platform for the formulation of basic environmental awareness for both the students enrolled in campaigning, and for those exposed to it on campus. I argue for a more nuanced appraisal of place based environmentalism: one that takes into account the importance of place based action in the development of basic environmental awareness and is attuned to the various pressures shaping a place based approach. Whilst acknowledging the inconsistencies underlying place based action on the part of students, my analysis also shows that the explanations offered by extant scholarship do not reflect the diverse spectrum of factors guiding the development of environmental critique and action. In the following sections, I will first introduce how the campus features in student environmentalism, offering evidence both for the limits of this close focus on campus life and for the opportunities that place based action affords to those students who have had no prior experience in environmental campaigning. I highlight the diversity of factors undergirding students' seemingly contradictory approaches to environmentalism and suggest that place based action is both a necessary precursor for broad scale environmental change, and a logical and effective response to the political, social and economic restrictions faced by environmentalists in China.

[18] I am especially indebted to Professor Anna Lora-Wainwright for kindly granting me permission to cite her material prior to its publication.

Environmentalism

There is a wide-ranging body of literature in the social sciences concerned with defining and measuring human behavioural norms and attitudes which are aimed at protecting the environment. Among the terminology aimed at capturing such behaviour, we come across various uses of the words 'environmentalism', 'pro-environmental behaviour' (see for instance Steg and Vlek, 2009), 'place-protective action' (Devine-Wright, 2009), 'environmental activism' (Mauch, Stoltzfus and Weiner, 2006), 'environmentally significant behaviour' (Stern, 2000), 'environmental citizenship' (Dobson and Bell, 2006) and 'green identities' (Horton, 2003). This is by no means an exhaustive list. Nor have these terms come to be understood or used based on a single, universally-accepted definition. The breadth of approaches to environmental behaviour is not surprising given empirical evidence. Day-to-day recycling may not seem to share much in common with Green peace-style activism, but both are linked – in some way – to a concern for the environment. As Horton (2003) describes it, 'environmentalism is a political force and high-profile environmental controversies are important objects of study. But environmentalism is also about the everyday' (Horton, 2003: 63). Horton (2003) illustrates how everyday practices of environmental activists in England largely determine activists belonging (or not belonging) to certain green groups. His work focuses on the role of embodiment and materialities in performing environmentalist identities.

Other studies focus on the link between identity and environmentalism. Whitmarsh and O'Neill (2010), for instance, explore the effect of pro-environmental self-identity and pro-environmental behaviour. Their findings from a survey of the UK public showed that pro-environmental self-identity only predicts certain types of pro-environmental behaviour (such as waste reduction or water usage) but had close to no relationship to others (such as transportation choice or political outlook) (Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010: 311). In a study on

environmental activism, pro-environmental behaviour and social identity, Dono, Webb and Richardson (2010) researched the relationship between social identity and activism. Their study of university students in Australia revealed a relationship between social identity and environmental behaviour, but also noted that only the citizenship component of identity related to environmental activism. Mauch, Stoltzfus and Weiner's (2006) study, 'Shades of Green', brings together stories of environmental activism across the globe, introducing the reader to a wide variety of environmental issues and action repertoires, focusing on outlining the political and social contexts of various environmental protests. They point out that, effectively, 'environmentalism' can only be understood as an umbrella term for a wide array of modes of action and behavioural norms. In exploring the environmentalism of China's urban educated young, I employ a behavioural approach to the definition of 'environmentalism', where it is defined 'as the propensity to take actions with pro-environmental intent' (Stern, 2000: 411).

Place, environmentalism and place based activism

That 'place' plays a central role in environmentalism is obvious. In all studies of environmentalism, place is discussed to provide a context for whichever green movement, policies or societal norms are being discussed. This reflects the common-sense notion that environmentalism takes different forms in New York than it does in Bali, and we thus need to clarify what 'place' we are talking about. In response to the Fukushima reactor disaster in 2011, for instance, the environmental movements in Germany and Switzerland launched a successful national demonstration against nuclear power usage. Distance from the environmental disaster did not stop them from relating it to their own country. China, on the other hand – a close neighbour to Japan – is aiming to more than triple its reactor capacity by 2020 (The Economist, 2014). Environmental policies are shaped by global environmental

threats and challenges but also local specificities. Studies on environmental movements, politics and citizens' environmental behaviour have thus sought to identify the effect of 'place' on environmental norms, attitudes and politics (such as Smith, 2001; Peterson del Mar, 2012; Armiero and Sedrez, 2014; Devine-Wright and Clayton, 2010 and Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

Geographers such as Relph (1976) and Tuan (1974) renewed interest in the theoretical underpinnings and role of place in geographic enquiry in the 1960s and 1970s, by going beyond the static theorisation of regional geography. They aimed to distinguish the concept from terms such as 'space' and the spatial sciences, which had effectively relegated 'place' to a mere location. This humanistic approach to place was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s when scholars began to argue for a conceptualisation that was to capture how people actively constructed places through social relations. Cresswell (1996) has been a lead figure in this development, arguing for a close link between place, meaning and power (Cresswell, 1996). In his work on political processes in modern Italy, Agnew (2002) argues that differences between places shape social, economic and political processes, structuring and restructuring people's identities. Harvey (1996) investigated how globalisation has an impact on the role of place in society, providing a rather sobering account of xenophobic, reactionary place based politics resulting from increased globalisation.

Massey (1994) points to the relationship between place, gender and race and argues for a 'progressive sense of place', as opposed to a sense of place based on nostalgia and inertia. She stresses how places connect the outside world through global processes and argues for a positive type of place based identity (Massey, 1994). May (1996) argues that neither of these conceptualisations adequately reflects how places shape our lives, as the same place can be experienced and understood through different narratives of its past and present, fundamentally

shaping people's relationships with a given place. This constant re-evaluation and redefinition of the role and meaning of 'place' simultaneously reflects the immense importance of place as a concept in human geography, as well as the multiple scales and meanings that the term incorporates.

In studies of activism, place based action plays a role both in urban activist movements (Mayer, 2009; Long, 2013; Buser et al., 2013) and in rural protest action (Fincher & Panelli, 2001). Much urban activism, for instance, is informed by demands for the protection of public space (Mayer, 2009; Gül, M, Dee, J. and Cünuk, C., 2014). Place also plays an important role in shaping the identity of activist groups. Writing about women's activism in Australia, Fincher and Panelli (2001), for instance, show how in both urban and rural contexts 'advancing their interests involves activists in spatial practices that seek simultaneously to achieve cohesion and identity for their group' (Fincher and Panelli, 2001: 129).

Scholars such as Long (2013) argue that academics do not concern themselves enough with the relationship between place and activism and how a sense of place shapes such activism. The role of place based action in informing global activist movements has also been discussed explicitly by Pearce (2012), who argues that connections between global movements and place based community action, for instance, must be better understood if we are to gain a comprehensive picture of contemporary activisms. Long (2013) and Mayer (2009) point to the possible contradictions inherent in place based action which may, for instance, succeed in protecting local economies or public spaces but still fail to address large scale economic imbalances and injustices or even reinforce these. These discussions about various ways in which place informs activism, and the need for a close inspection of this process is central to debates of environmentalism.

Studies on environmentalism have evidenced that 'place' is also a necessary concomitant to the interrelation of environmental processes, and place based activism holds a particularly controversial position in studies of environmental movements as it is deemed, by some, as a contradictory response to increasingly global environmental threats. Like Long's (2013), review of urban activism, this article makes a case for the importance of place in understanding activism. Different to other studies concerned with place based environmentalism, however (Smith, 2001; Peterson del Mar, 2012), I argue for a more nuanced appraisal of how place shapes activism. Instead, building on May (1996) and Massey (1994) and taking forward scholarship on place based environmentalism, this study argues for a positive approach to place and place based environmental action in particular. I highlight that we should acknowledge the importance of attention to place in developing basic environmental awareness and literacy – instead of judging environmental action against abstract, normative ideas of environmentalism that must tackle global problems.

Place and environmentalism

Human relationships with the natural environment are shaped by the places in which their lives unfold: both the *natural* environment in these places and the *narratives* of this environment as constructed through socio-political processes. The potency of analysing 'place' in explaining and predicting environmental behaviour has gained more attention due to evidence linking people's environmental behaviour to the attachment and relationship to specific places (see for instance Devine-Wright and Clayton, 2010; Hernandez et al., 2010 and Scannel and Gifford, 2010). In a special issue on this subject, Devine-Wright and Clayton (2010) suggest that 'our identities are shaped (…) by the people and places that we encounter. Attention to, and interpretations of, environmental threats are clearly filtered through a perspective based on the perceiver's identity' (Devine-Wright and Clayton, 2010: 267).

Differences in places shape how people perceive nature and how they choose to interact with and impact the environment (e.g. treat it as a resource or as something to be protected). However, environmental problems are no longer necessarily localised, neither are the roots and causes of environmental problems easily 'placed' on a map (as a result of, for instance, international trade or garbage flows). Investigating how environmentalism shapes and is shaped by places is an important additional lens through which to explore the effectiveness of environmental action and the role, meaning and relevance of place in contemporary society.

Smith (2001) and Armiero and Sedrez (2014) have suggested that a focus on the environmental protection of specific places (either areas such as national parks but also specific cities and countries) may negatively affect the effectiveness of environmental movements in dealing with contemporary environmental problems. Armiero and Sedrez's (2014) study of the history of environmentalism brings together essays on environmental movements and environmental disputes from around the globe to illustrate both local variations in environmental movements and the necessity for a global mindset in tackling environmental problems. On the one hand, they argue that 'a sense of place drives communities to recognize the hidden hazards in the environment they know' (Armiero and Sedrez, 2014: 3); on the other, however, they suggest that contemporary environmental challenges can only be effectively addressed if environmental policies incorporate both local needs and an understanding of global environmental problems such as climate change, pollution and waste management. They cite waste dumping by developed countries into less-developed countries or regions as an example of environmental policies that serve the local but ultimately endanger the planet as a whole.

Peterson del Mar's (2012) and Smith's (2001) studies of environmentalism in the United States criticise Americans' romanticised view of the environment. Smith (2001) argues that

American environmentalists focus on the conservation of certain parts of the wilderness and eco-tourism, and fail to address the social and economic norms displayed in day-to-day urban places, which are categorised by resource exploitation and pollution. He suggests that a focus on 'place based' environmentalism may actually serve to reinforce existing social and economic orders that create environmental sustainability problems in the first place.

In China, the majority of environmental protests evidence a highly localised character where citizens of specific cities or villages oppose the building of, for instance, chemical plants or waste incinerators that are often relocated to poorer and more rural areas as a result of such opposition. Traditionally, such protests are often dismissed as Nimby protests, which do little to improve environmental governance and are based on selfish and localised interests. This suggests that China might be a typical example of the sort of contradiction in environmental protest politics that Smith (2001) describes. However, scholarship such as Lang and Xu's (2013) analysis of anti-incinerator protests and Johnson's (2010) study on Nimby and ENGO actions suggests that Nimby protests actually serve an important role in alerting media to environmental issues and in improving public participation in environmental governance.

Political surveillance and repression of protests and activism also relegates ENGO action to very clearly-defined areas of state-sanctioned environmental campaigning. The regional boundaries in which ENGOs are permitted to campaign are also defined by the state. Nevertheless, ENGOs are often lauded as effective agents of change that insert themselves into regional and even national political processes (Ho and Edmonds, 2007; Yang, 2006). In the case of student environmentalism, campaign efforts, unless tied to sanctioned work with ENGOs, are restricted to their respective campus environments. This study explores the origin and nature of place based environmental action amongst Chinese university students and discusses the effectiveness of their environmental critique and action in light of China's

growing environmental crisis. I illustrate how place based action allows students to express their concerns for nature and environmental degradation – despite a neglect of large-scale environmental issues such as air pollution. To explore this contradiction and how it informs our understanding of place based environmentalism, I focus on two university SEAs: the Beijing Jiaotong University SEA 'Green Family' on their campus in the south of Haidian university district close to the city centre, and the Beijing Forestry University's SEA 'Green Finger' in the north of the university district.

To illustrate how a focus on place impacts students' environmentalism, I will focus first on campus life, then on students' perceptions of the city and broader environmental issues. Through this, I first highlight similarities to place based movements as described by Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012). In the latter section, I show, however, that place based action, whilst not offering an immediate solution to current global environmental threats, provides an invaluable gateway into environmental awareness and I argue for a more a nuanced appraisal of place based action. Whilst global, national and even some local environmental threats such as air pollution are seen as too 'big' to tackle for students, place based action offers them an opportunity to develop environmental awareness and literacy despite these perceived limits of their own actions.

Methods

Peterson del Mar (2012) notes that young people have traditionally been amongst the main constituents of environmental movements. He suggests that 'environmental activists, like other reformers, have tended to be young, but they have also been well-educated, often prosperous' (Peterson del Mar, 2012: 95). Youth might be considered especially likely to exhibit the romantic tendencies Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) document in their

work on the American environmental movement. Those enrolled in higher education, however, may also be more aware of larger scale environmental issues equipping them to formulate effective agendas. Students and young people form a main constituency of the Chinese environmental movement and are involved in environmental protection campaigning in student environmental associations and ENGOs across the country (Yang, 2005; Lu, 2003; Wu, 2006).

For this research, I interviewed 50 students and young professionals in Beijing, China. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and complemented by participant observation, 'hanging out time' and informal chats as well as pictorial evidence. Out of the 50 respondents, 35 were students who were reading for an undergraduate degree at a university in Beijing, or visiting Beijing for an internship as part of their university degree somewhere else. I interviewed students from all years (1–3 or, for some degrees, 1–4). All students were enrolled in either a campus-based student environmental association (henceforth SEA) or were working for environmental NGOs around the city. I also interviewed their bosses and colleagues at these NGOs. With the exception of 5 of them, all students and young professionals did not have siblings, and about 40 of them had moved to Beijing from another city. Most students were enrolled at either the Beijing Forestry University or the Beijing Jiaotong University. Degrees read included but were not limited to: Transport Studies, Logistics, Information Technology, Forest Management, Engineering, Environmental Engineering, Wood Science, Social Studies, Media and Languages. Interviews were focused on students' interests in the environment but also included questions about their home, their parents, their experiences of growing up and education, their experiences of university, their friends and their plans for the future. Some I interviewed repeatedly, collecting pictures and anecdotes of their lives and 'hanging out' with them socially.

Campus environmentalism

Smith (2001) emphasises in his work the extent to which people channel environmental concerns into anxieties about local places. He suggests that a romanticised view of nature shapes

> the awareness and definition of environmental problems. Infatuation with wild, pristine nature tends to steer our attention away from our own impacts on the larger "nature" that surrounds us, specially where these impacts are indirect or subtle (Smith, 2001: 122).

I observed a similar phenomenon in Chinese universities where student environmental associations (SEAs) were largely concerned with the protection of their local campus environment. The aesthetics and social qualities of the university campus are important to the environmentalism of these students in a variety of ways. It is these students' new home for three to four years, the place where they need to make connections for the future and the first place that they must navigate without their parents' help. This matters as it greatly increases the importance of 'making sense' of this place, and may motivate them to join student clubs such as SEAs. Two second-year students who had been involved in the SEA from the beginning of their degrees showed me pictures of 'Green Family' activities from the previous two years. It looked like a family photo album. They commented on people in the pictures, saying things like, '*ah this guy is so funny, you have to meet him'* or talked to each other wondering why one of the year two girls had not shown up recently, and whether they should check on her. The Jiaotong University SEA was given the name 'Green Family' based on the idea that '*the whole world should be a green garden and people should treat each other as family*' (Professor Li, teacher). Therefore, new members of the SEA are called '*children*' and are assigned second year '*parents*'. Third years are referred to as 'elders' (*lao ren*). The aim

of this is to establish a family atmosphere and to show incoming students that caring for the environment also includes a focus on looking out for each other. The Green Family prides itself on supporting its members in all areas of student life and essentially providing a home away from home.

The pride SEA students take in their campus is evident all across their universities. There are stickers everywhere on the campuses of Jiaotong University and the Forestry University, reminding students of the presence of these green groups. There are notes to remind them not to litter, to love nature and to save resources. On the trees, there are signs telling students what type of tree they are looking at. Maps are handed out at the start of the academic year showing the natural diversity on campus as well as book marks featuring trees and birds that are found on campus. This map in particular was presented and explained to me numerous times, with one of the third years explaining to me that the *'the map was created to make students realise who they share this campus with'*. To this end, SEA members regularly take students out for walks across campus, educating them about the plants and animals there, and cleaning or renewing signs. I overheard them chatting about other students littering, and wondering how they could make students realise that '*there is wild life on our campus and we need to protect it'* (2nd year Jiaotong university).

This focus on the campus as a home, and the will to preserve its natural environment, is clearly reflected in all regular activities and events SEA members organise. There are three main areas of pro-environmental activities for Green Family members. Firstly, 'recycling' involves events aimed at increasing student awareness of the benefits of recycling items such as plastic bottles, chopsticks and school books (which students are encouraged to pass on to lower year groups instead of throwing away). Secondly, 'education', where members educate their peers through stalls and signs on campus (on issues such as waste reduction, saving

water and electricity, air pollution and water pollution). And, lastly, 'plants and animals', which consists of campaigns focused on the wildlife of campus but also incorporates trips to animal shelters outside Beijing. All of these activities incorporate a strong focus on mutual support, togetherness and family values, both amongst SEA students and the larger student body.

SEA environmentalism is place-focused in so far as it is intimately tied to campus nature and to creating a home for members and other students. The 'passing the torch' event, for instance, where books are given to younger students, is meant to serve both a recycling purpose and to help out students who are struggling financially. Giving out plants for dorm rooms to students who collect large quantities of plastic bottles and bring them to the Green Family is meant to encourage the recycling of plastic bottles. SEA members wish to make students aware that caring for the environment will improve the look and feel of their home. Although other SEA members I interviewed from different Beijing universities did not call themselves 'Green Family', their focus on mutual support in and outside SEA life and their sense of responsibility for the campus environment in particular was evident throughout conversations with these students. The family aspect of SEA work was a constantly recurring theme. Being a member of the environmental association to many of these students meant being 'part of the family' that looked after their home and the nature that surrounded it, whether they were part of the Jiaotong SEA or another across the city.

Knowing of the loneliness and pressure that university life can bring, the green family designed postcards for incoming students, asking them to come and join the 'green family'. One of the cards that was handed out to male freshmen made a joke about the small number of female students at Jiaotong University, suggesting that it was better to join their green family since it was impossible to find a girlfriend. It read: '*If you're not gay, you shouldn't be at Jiaotong university! Come and join the green family!'*. Although students picked this

association from a vast range of available options, for many, the content of the work and activities associated with this commitment was considered only a marginal factor in their decision to stick to it, a finding that is also evident in Li's (2009) analysis of students' political socialisation and civic participation. Instead, what drew and kept most of these students enrolled in SEA life was the social security they felt in being part of this network. SEA associations became a crucial part of youth identity as university students, not only with regard to environmentalist values, but rather being a member of a 'campus family'.

The Jiaotong SEA office is based in an underground structure below the university. There are countless books, awards, boxes containing their t-shirts, bags, Green Family giveaways like postcards and calendars and on the wall there is a pin board with dozens of colourful notes that members have written to each other. The notes range from '*don't forget the meeting tomorrow!*' to '*let's go green family, lets make the whole world green*' to more personal notes from one member to another. Another recurring theme was the notion that caring for the environment was a civic duty. Students explained to me that you simply had to care about nature if you wanted to be a good person, saying for instance: *'I want to be a good person, a person of 'quality' (suzhi), caring for nature is a service to society' (1st year student Jiaotong)*. This was not necessarily tied to wanting to be a good person but could also be motivated by wanting to be *seen* as a good person, as a 2nd girl evidenced when she said that she liked being in an SEA because '*I like it when people think I'm a really good person!*'. ENGO employees working with students – such as those at the Jane Goodall Institute – also pointed out that today's Chinese youth relate pro-environmental behaviour to being a responsible member of society. Thus, they may join SEAs or ENGOs in their work to either fulfil their sense of responsibility, or at least to be perceived as having one. Members of the ENGO 'Green Student Forum' seconded this and added that this also correlates with a shift in

employment practices, which now require graduates to add extracurricular activities to their CV, in order to illustrate a concern for other members of society.

However, students' expressions of commitment to the environmental cause and the campus environment in particular did not translate into a consistent set of pro-environmental consumption choices or other pro-environmental lifestyle changes. Students would, for instance, campaign for recycling, not littering and saving water and electricity on campus but there was little evidence of a 'spill over' effect of these activities into other areas of their lives such as food consumption or transportation. One third-year student said: *'I am only prepared to make a few changes when it comes to the environment. For example, of course I know that cars pollute. They are bad for the environment. But at the end of the day, I'm still a guy and I am Chinese, I want a car. A big car.'*

These findings are similar to what Smith (2001) observed about environmentalism in the United States. He argues that American environmentalism focuses on romantic ideas of nature and the protection of particular places rather than addressing the underlying processes of consumption and wastefulness causing environmental problems in the first instance. According to his work, people may fail to solve large and pressing issues such as resource exploitation and wastefulness by focusing on their local environment (in this case, the campus), effectively reinforcing the social and economic order responsible for environmental degradation. Student environmentalism was described to me by a former ENGO member as *'an environmentalism of the living room'*, one that is based on a code of behavioural norms associated with being a 'good person', a 'good friend' that looks after their home and those in it. Actual pro-environmental lifestyle choices were inconsistent across the group. Rather, membership performance was focused on participating in chosen environmental campaigns and codes of social conduct in and outside of these meetings and events. A recurring response

type I encountered when I asked students what it meant to be a member of a SEA was: '*It's like being part of a family'*, '*like having brothers and sisters*', '*you can always rely on them, even if it's not about the environment*' '*they help you because people who care about the environment are simple and honest*'.

Place based environmentalism and political constraints

Smith (2001) suggests that environmentalists in the U.S. that seek to protect wilderness areas

> [produce environmentalist] discourse in ways that tend to rule out serious consideration of issues and relationships that extend beyond rural areas–including human activities that tie together urban and rural, as well as the global-scale problems that affect both place and region, city and country' (Smith, 2001: 124)

In the case of SEA environmentalism, one might assume that their place based environmentalism does not reflect a lack of serious engagement with such broader issues due to political constraints. Given the political restrictions placed on SEA action, it may appear that Smith's (2001) concerns about place based environmentalism cannot be levelled at SEA activities.

However, SEA's focus on campus life is only partially due to university restrictions. Rather, it results from students' understanding of wider environmental issues and interlinks with the already extant expectations that environmentalism is tied to looking after the immediate surroundings and peers, strengthening students' focus on the immediate nature surrounding them, social networks and creating a 'homely' atmosphere. Contrary to results from scholarship relating to political and legal constraints faced by environmental NGOs

(Schwartz, 2004; Ho and Edmonds, 2007), student environmentalism is place based not only because of political boundaries. That SEA students' environmental campaigning does not include national environmental issues is only partly due to the restrictions placed upon them by campus authorities. Rather, their approach is based also on their own interpretation of China's environmental situation, evidencing similar contradictions in their approach to environmental protection that Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) observed in the United States.

When students and I were discussing China's environmental situation as a whole, I often sensed the same dilemma that Smith (2001) describes in American environmentalists' assessments of large-scale environmental issues. Although their active campaigning efforts only began at university, SEA students suggested that their hometowns and villages and their experience of growing up also shaped their understanding of nature and the environment. The majority of students I interviewed had moved to Beijing for their studies from cities and villages across the Chinese provinces. Thus, many of them had been raised in environments entirely different to the one they were exposed to in Beijing. They had vivid memories of either enjoying the unpolluted nature of their homes or seeing '*pollution arrive*' during their childhood. A recurring theme was air and water pollution, as well as excessive littering and industrial waste dumped in forests, fields or rivers.

A student from Taiyuan city in Shanxi province remembered how, one day, the rain started to have an 'odd' colour because of the power plants. Other students reported how their village or city started to smell badly because of industrial waste dumped in the fields or waterways. Some had come from nature-rich villages and towns and were stunned by the air, litter and smells of Beijing. Students' experiences of the effect of economic development on nature were sometimes cited as the reason for joining SEAs at university. Their wish for better

environmental governance, however, conflicted with their understanding of China's economic situation. China, in relation to other countries, was seen as a third world country that still had the "right" to pollute, as many of its citizens were so poor. Thus I often found myself in discussions such as this one with two 2nd year students from Jiaotong (student 1: male, 18, from Hubei province; student 2: female, 20, from Fujian province):

> CvM: *So, what do you think of the environmental situation in China in general?*
>
> Student 1: *Well… the environmental situation in China is really, really terrible. China always worked on the premise of 'cleaning up later', after development… that was wrong. But then, so many people in China are still so poor, so I think we have to prioritise them.*
>
> CvM: *So you think it is not possible to do both, look after the environment and grow economically?*
>
> Student 2: *Maybe…but eradicating poverty is still more important than the environment. The government doesn't really have a choice.*

Although almost all students saw the detrimental effect of pollution on their homes, they also felt that this might be a necessary price to pay to alleviate social grievances, a stance akin to government rhetoric on this subject. Whilst their experience of pollution motivated them to participate in environmental action on campus, they saw their work aligned with – rather than opposed to – further economic development. This reflects Peterson Del Mar's (2012) finding, that 'environmentalism dwells on the paradoxical relationship between prosperity and nature loving' (Peterson Del Mar, 2012: 3).

The sheer scale and complexity of China's environmental problems are in and of themselves reasons for students to focus on the small-scale changes and impact they can have on campus.

'*China is SO big! Every province is different and the problems are different problems everywhere. No one can say they really understand the situation*' (Xiaohui, 19, Beijing Forestry University)

'*There are actually quite a few good policies but China is too big, it's difficult to implement them everywhere*' (Yi, 1st year, Beijing Forestry University)

'*Environmental problems in China are endless but people only ever notice those that directly affect them*' (Houdai, 20, Jiaotong University)

Smith (2001) observes that environmentalists might fail to focus on broadscale environmental issues, suggesting that 'this inertia is reinforced by the sheer magnitude and complexity of the challenge' (Smith, 2001: 129). Crucially, as their own understanding of environmental problems and their own role in it becomes clearer to them, students also begin to understand the limits of their actions many of them feel that what they do has '*no real impact'* and that '*at the end of the day, the government must solve the problem*' since their experience tells them that '*one person cannot change the world'*.

The economic situation of the Chinese nation in relation to other (developed) nations creates a setting for student environmentalism that affects students' estimations of their own roles and impact as well as their understanding of environmental policies. Rather than trying to analyse the economical or environmental policies and processes behind large-scale environmental degradation, students choose to focus on possible improvements in their immediate surroundings. Their understanding of China as a developing country also forestalls commitment to global environmental problems.

Students also felt that Western countries could not expect China to commit to emission reductions, or to other climate change mitigating policies, as China was suffering from Western countries outsourcing their pollution to them: an 18 year old young man who studied Environmental Engineering at the Forestry University, for instance, remembered that he had seen how in his home town (Liuzhou, Guangxi province) industries pumped the air so full of pollution that it came down as 'sour rain'. He then added: '*But that's because the Western nations know that we are a developing country, so send us all their polluting industries and benefit from our lax laws*'.

Smith (2001) cites American environmentalists as being aware of the limits of their actions and deciding, nonetheless, to focus on their traditional action repertoire to protect the wild. The same contradiction was evident in the words and actions of SEA members. Numerous times students lamented the limited impact of their actions. They were proud to be members of a group that looked after the environment and often remarked how little their peers outside the SEA appreciated nature. In respect to the larger student body, I was told repeatedly by SEA members that other students did not care about the environment because they thought their own actions did not matter that much, whereas students in the SEA had understood that every individual had a responsibility to act in environmentally-sound ways. When asked about the effectiveness of their campaigning on the larger student body, however, some SEA members suggested that they often doubted that students outside the SEA were actually affected by their work at all. In relation to the 'bottle collection' event, for instance, students remarked that they thought their peers only collected their plastic bottles and recycled them at the SEA stand to get a plant for their room in return, not because they had understood why they should recycle. Their actions were aimed at creating a campus environment that allows students to feel closer to nature, to respect their environment and to ensure its sustainability, however it was not always clear that other students responded to these messages.

Inconsistent environmentalism?

So far, this article has outlined how students channel their anxieties over environmental degradation and concern for nature into a focus on campus life and nature, whilst they neglect to address underlying patterns of development and consumption.

As such, findings from this study contribute to current research on environmental movements and environmentalism in China. My work shows that place based environmentalism – and the absence of broader environmental critique and action amongst environmentalist groups in China – do not necessarily result from political surveillance and repression alone. Rather, a focus on the protection of specific places and issues, such as local plants and wildlife, can result from participants' understandings of China's environmental issues and their interpretations of worthwhile environmental actions. For members of student environmental associations in Beijing, being an environmentalist tends to be founded on a concern for the immediate environment and a code of conduct based on being a good person with strong family values and morals. SEA students tend to discuss the environment with reference to campus wildlife and the sociality of being on campus. Their perception of the aesthetics and social qualities of campus life creates a brand of environmentalism that is focused on their immediate surroundings and social life - rather than national or even global issues.

According to Smith (2001), place based environmentalism represents a mixture of romantic and utilitarian views of nature, where those environmental concerns that would require a change of consumption behaviour or materialistic sacrifice are ignored. He writes that

> at its core, this model represents a marriage of romanticism and techno-scientific managerialism whereby, armed with enough knowledge and expertise, any significant

> limitations on personal freedom or substantial reform of existing political and economic systems can be avoided. (Smith, 2001: 127)

However, I believe that critiques of place based environmentalism are somewhat short-sighted in arguing that there is a causal link between place based action and the absence of broad scale action. Rather, I suggest that place based action is a necessary and invaluable precursor for broader critique and action. With relation to Nimbysm, Johnson (2010) makes a similar argument with regard to improvements in public participation in policy-making through Nimby action. I would argue that any form of place based action should be analysed in order to gauge its potential as a gateway into campaigning on a broader scale before criticising its initial form.

To show that a causal link between place based action and the absence of large scale campaigning cannot be substantiated at close inspection I first review the reasons undergirding student focus on the campus. I have already outlined that students explained their focus on campus as result of being drawn to the social and aesthetic qualities of the campus, and the impression that 'development must come first' and 'China is so big'. As such place based environmentalism does in fact represent 'a marriage of romanticism and techno-scientific managerialism' (Smith, 2001: 127) and an inertia created by the magnitude of the problem. I argue, however, that the inconsistencies in their approach to environmental issues are not satisfactorily explained with the reasons suggested by Smith (2001). Rather, I suggest that place based action is the result of a delicate balance between conflicting sentiments: a feeling of responsibility towards nature versus a feeling of helplessness in the face of broader issues, desires for environmental health versus economic imperatives and, in the case of China, political risk versus activists ambitions. I have already described how the feeling of being 'overwhelmed' has an impact on activists' assessment of their own role. In the

following I will describe a further two predicaments – economic imperatives and political risk – that activists are faced with.

Environmental health versus economic imperatives

With regard to environmental health, Lora-Wainwright's (2013) work on environmental activism in rural China, for instance, has shown that environmental activists may come to accept hazardous levels of pollution if their desire for health conflicts with, for example, the need for economic growth. A potent example of this phenomenon can be seen in SEA students' approach to air pollution in Beijing. During my three fieldtrips from December 2012 through to December 2013, the air in Beijing was regularly rated as 'hazardous' by the American Embassy Air Pollution Monitor.

The city around them featured in many of my conversations with students and ENGO members. It was seen both as a city of '*many opportunities*' and '*endless choices*', as well as a place that made them '*miss nature*' and '*miss home*': a place that was '*too big*', '*too crowded*' and '*too polluted*'. The vast majority of students were thus faced with the dilemma of wanting to build their lives in the capital, and knowing full well that this would come with the now globally-infamous bad air quality and impending water shortage. Whereas the issue of climate change was seen as the responsibility of other nations and too big an issue to tackle, Beijing's air pollution was an issue that was directly affecting students and which they were allowed to educate their peers about. Part of SEA campaigning on campus included education campaigns about air pollution, associated health problems and advice on how students might avoid exposing themselves to it on particularly polluted days.

SEA students were, thus, not only aware of Beijing's air pollution problem; they were also educating other students on campus about it and permitted to do so. Nevertheless, not once did I see one of these students wear a mask to protect themselves from it or stay inside on heavily polluted days (as was their advice to other students). I was regularly laughed at for wearing a mask myself, leading me to leave it at home after a few months, a decision that I would often regret but stick to nonetheless. Students explained to me that '*Chinese lungs are used to it*' and there were endless jokes about foreigners suffering when they came to Beijing because they could not handle the air. Yet, when I would hang out with one of them individually, I would frequently hear comments about the bad air, how it affected, for instance, their eyes and their skin, or made them tired. It was evident that it did not leave them as unfazed as their comments about 'Chinese lungs' made it seem. However, they had to balance this with their desire to live and work in Beijing and, at some point, to raise a family there.

This raises the question as to how they reconciled what they knew and taught their peers about the dangers inherent in the very air they breathed - and their own seemingly irresponsible behaviour. One of the second-year students explained to me that, in his opinion, students were well aware of the danger of being exposed to these levels of pollutants over long periods of time. However, he said, that their concern was not with '*trying to avoid the problem but trying to avoid the fear of it'*. Thus, wearing a mask was not an option for it would be an acknowledgement of the problem itself. Rather, they would choose to believe that, although it was theoretically dangerous, they were now '*used to it'*. One of the third-year girls even insisted that there was relationship between her move to Beijing and an improvement of her skin and monthly period pain, saying that '*even air pollution has its benefits*'.

Students also often compared Beijing to London in the 1950s, saying that evidently such pollution was a regrettable but necessary step towards creating a thriving and modern city. Beijing as the city of possibility, and Beijing as a hotbed for environmental problems, were conflicted in the students' conception of the city around them. Although their environmentalism is enacted in Beijing and makes them more aware of Beijing's environmental problems, they also reject the notion that they might need to modify their behaviour accordingly (wearing a mask, using public transport rather than cars, recycling outside of campus). In her book on environmental health in China, Lora-Wainwright (2017) describes this conundrum in environmental activists' approaches to specific environmental problems. She outlines that 'knowledge of pollution cannot be separated from the many other challenges locals face – such as finding work, paying for healthcare and improving their family homes' (Lora-Wainwright, 2017: 9).

Political risk versus activists' ambitions

Whilst there are laws governing permitted activist behaviour in other countries as well, the political environment for any form of political or social activism in China is particularly restrictive. The continued existence of student environmental associations hinges on their ability to stay clear of 'politically sensitive issues' and upon their cooperation with bodies of state surveillance such as the Communist Youth League (CYL). Although the government has permitted and even supported the growth of environmentalist youth groups, their efforts are pedantically monitored and censored in all aspects of SEA life and campaigning. Every campaign has to receive the permission of CYL authorities; their members are part of every SEA and serve as a constant reminder of party surveillance. The university can restrict money resources for SEA campaigns, refuse to permit new campaigns without offering an explanation, cancel events, order SEA members to take part in CYL environmental campaign

competitions, decimate SEA membership by restricting the amount of associations that first years are permitted to join or increasing academic pressure. Campaigns can also be criticised on the university webpage if they are deemed to digress from the party line in any way.

The campus is the only place where students are allowed to campaign: the location for all their events and get-togethers. With a select few exceptions, events are restricted to campus by university guidelines. According to the students, as well as a professor, responsible for looking after the SEA, the university forbids its students from organising or attending any student events that have not been approved by the various sub-bodies of the university administration, including the Communist Youth League and various teachers. Constant surveillance is clearly visible across campus, both in the form of security guards and CCTV cameras as well as statues and various posters praising members of the Chinese Communist Party for their achievements or echoing various party slogans. SEA events are restricted to the students and teachers who make up the campus community. This necessarily shapes the choice made about environmental topics and formats of events, with SEA members trying to address issues that are particular to student lifestyles.

Whilst this is only part of the reason that SEA life is campus-oriented, political restrictions must necessarily be part of the analysis when investigating why student environmentalism in China is so limited in its scale. Political risk, individual and national economic imperatives – paired with being 'overwhelmed' by the magnitude of the problem – all combine to shape student campaigning into the sort of place based action describe above. They do combine to ensure, at least to a degree, that broad scale issues such as climate change do not feature on student agendas at the moment. There is, however, no logical link between place based action and the absence of broad scale environmentalism. The crucial point here is that it is not necessarily correct that place based action hinders the formulation of more broad scale campaigning because it allows students to channel their anxieties into small scale projects as

suggested by Smith (2001).

Rather, students who considered place based environmentalism offered through SEA work to be lacking in impact had other options. There was a subset of students, who were aware of the contradictions inherent in SEA action and therefore sought to increase the impact of their actions through other institutional platforms. These youth echoed concerns raised by scholars such as Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) about place based action. A student SEA drop-out, who later worked for an ENGO, for instance, told me that this focus on environmental protection of the campus alone was '*SO boring! They are just picking up litter!'*. A young woman, who worked for the ENGO 'Nature University' in Beijing, similarly criticised how students were treating their university years like '*living in an old people's home'*, focused on narrow parameters and unambitious targets. She acknowledged the various bureaucratic and temporal constraints to SEA campaigning but dismissed these as explanations for the lack of broader campaigns. At an SEA competition of universities in Shanghai, she noted an SEA campaign directed at promoting female hygiene products made from recyclable material as an example of how SEAs can address contemporary issues of wastefulness and unsustainable consumer behaviour. She blamed the students' focus on campus life for their '*boring*' campaigns in Beijing.

Those members of the SEA who said they were frustrated with the campus boundaries judged SEA action to be an ineffective answers to environmental issues and perceived this lack of impact to also be a result of censorship and containment by authorities such as the Communist Youth League. ENGO staff and volunteers reported that this narrow focus on campus life led them to pursue their environmentalist ideals outside the confines of the SEA. Organisations such as the China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN) and the Jane Goodall Institute aim to involve SEAs in national-scale campaigns aimed at reducing greenhouse gases and

wildlife protection. In the case of CYCAN, this focus on climate change issues once again translates into sustainability campaigns on campus; however, CYCAN use this as an exemplary platform to teach students about the links between local energy use and global environmental problems. The Jane Goodall Institute's petition for wildlife protection (e.g. pledge to eat no shark fin soup) involved students collecting signatures across Beijing and their own home towns – but it was a one-off project, not a recurrent type of campaign usually associated with SEA life. Some SEA members thus effectively neglected SEA events altogether and decided to embark on long-term internships in a variety of environmental NGOs instead.

Those who continued to uphold SEA work, however, consider place based projects to be the logical course of action towards effective environmental critique and action, given the political, social and economic climate.

Evolution of place based environmentalism

Despite the limitations outlined above, to dismiss SEA environmentalisms as ineffective belies the myriad of small-scale contributions to environmental sustainability that it effects. Their environmental education efforts in local schools represent a much-needed support base for governmental and ENGO efforts to include environmental education in the national school curriculum. Although this has been mandated as obligatory in all schools, teachers are often unable or unwilling to teach this material in class (Lin and Ross, 2006). The ability and willingness of SEA students to contribute their knowledge and to educate both teachers and students enables the integration of environmental education into formal schooling. SEA campaigns on campus are also not necessarily limited to a stagnant set of campaigns but can be adapted to respond to new environmental issues. The Forestry University SEA, for

instance, aimed to find a solution to excessive cooking oil waste in their canteen by researching how to turn such waste into soap.

Although evidence for a link between a consistent set of pro-environmental behavioural norms and group membership remained inconclusive, behavioural changes with regard to pro-environmental behaviour were visible amongst SEA students. A third-year Jiaotong SEA student told me how embarrassed she felt when she went for lunch with the Green Family in her first year and everyone had brought their reusable chopsticks, except her. This story is akin to what Horton (2003) describes at green activist gatherings in the UK. Horton observed that it was important for activists to perform their belonging to certain green groups by making consumption choices (such as milk versus soymilk) or transportation choices (bike versus car) that were consistent with group behaviour. There was some evidence for this effect of group membership on certain types of pro-environmental behaviour patterns, largely related to day-to-day tasks such as switching off lights when leaving a room, recycling, saving water and reusing chopsticks. The majority of research participants reported that their membership in the SEAs had increased their environmental awareness and that they had modified their own behaviour, particularly with regard to saving resources, littering and paying attention to environmental news. These behavioural changes were largely tied to their attention to campus life and nature.

Furthermore, the majority of young people who end up committing to the environmental cause full-time have formerly been enrolled in SEA life and cite this time as the beginning of their interest in the environment. Fincher and Panelli (2001) have stressed the importance of spatial practices in informing activist groups' identities and cohesion. A similar process is visible in students' approach to environmentalism – the formation of their identity as environmental activists is intimately bound to their understanding of the university campus as

their home. As such, a focus on place is an important factor in creating a feeling of 'togetherness' in a cause of action and in creating a sense of unity despite differences in, for instance, politics, social backgrounds and other sources of diversity. Additionally, although former SEA members may dismiss SEA action as ineffective, their time as members led students to develop an understanding of environmental issues and broader environmental critiques in the first place. This suggests that SEA membership is an effective educational platform for the formulation of basic environmental awareness and as a gateway into broader environmental critique and action.

SEA campaigning is currently bound to the campus and is largely aimed at preserving this limited space, reflecting a similar approach to the protection of the environment that Smith (2001) and Peterson del Mar (2012) criticised in environmental activist groups in the United States. However, SEA members also reported that the SEA was crucial in their initial development of a basic environmental awareness and an understanding of environmental issues. This paper, therefore, supports Armiero and Sedrez's (2014) finding that an understanding of the local environment can alert citizens to broader environmental challenges. Whilst their current place based environmental action may not address large scale, underlying issues of consumption and wastefulness, students' focus on the protection of local nature has alerted some members to 'think globally and act locally'. Reflecting on the impact of their campaign efforts has also led these students to critique or leave SEA groups. When we consider contradictions inherent in environmental movements and politics, and criticisms of 'place based environmentalism' in particular, it is necessary to keep in mind the evolving nature of environmental awareness, which may well require an appreciation of wilderness areas and the protection of specific places (such as the campus) before progressing to include broad-scale environmental issues such as climate change.

Smith (2001) suggests that environmentalists might fail to focus on broad-scale environmental issues because 'this inertia is reinforced by the sheer magnitude and complexity of the challenge' (Smith, 2001: 129). He fails to acknowledge, however, that an understanding of broad-scale environmental issues and an individual's impact upon large scale issues necessitates environmental literacy – it requires an understanding of the relationship between individual action and nature, an ability to express this connection and develop environmentalist critique and campaigning that is formulated in a way that reaches other citizens or policy makers. As such, place based action can be seen not as 'inertia'; rather, it may be considered to be a sensible response to the lived reality of pollution. In studies of place based action in urban movements, Long (2013) argues that 'some movements may be increasingly seeking action on the local scale where realistic goals are achievable and the impact of local communities and the local environment is tangible' (Long, 2013: 65). In a similar vein, students enrolled in environmental activism may not offer direct solutions to air pollution, national or global environmental issues due to the reasons offered by Smith (2001) — they channel their anxieties about environmental issues into a focus on campus life instead.

Rather than a short sighted response to increasingly global threats, this approach can be seen however as highly successful in motivating students to join environmental campaigning whilst staying clear of large-scale political repression. As such, place based action on Chinese university campuses has been a highly effective tool in spreading environmental awareness, establishing environmental campaigning as an accepted part of campus life and providing environmental NGOs – who do tackle national and even global issues – with a constant stream of enthusiastic volunteers and employees who have had the chance to develop basic environmental critique and action within their university SEAs. Additionally, critiques of place based environmentalism are somewhat short-sighted in arguing that there is a causal

link between place based action and the absence of broad scale action. Rather, I suggest that place based action is a necessary and invaluable precursor for broader critique and action.

Going further, an analysis of SEA groups in other Chinese cities, particularly in the south of China – in relation to the places they aim to protect –would lend itself to the comparison of environmentalist ideals across China, their local specificities and the importance of place in the formulation of environmentalist agendas. Findings from this study are based on SEA and ENGO members' assessments of SEA environmentalism. Measuring the impact of SEA environmental action would be usefully complemented by further research on the larger student body's response to SEA activities.

Strategies of youth environmental education NGOs in China.

Changing research paradigms in assessing NGO positionality and effectiveness.

Abstract

Literature on the role of non-governmental organisations (henceforth NGOs) tends to focus on whether or not they provide a real alternative to established governmental and institutional settings and the capitalist mode of economic development. This debate is also prominent in scholarship on NGOs working in China, especially amongst researchers tracing NGO engagement in the environmental sector. One of the most pressing questions in these discussions is whether environmental NGOs provide Chinese society with the opportunity to bring about real reforms to environmental law and policy. Ultimately, the debate also seeks to evaluate whether they strengthen civil society and could be a catalyst for democratic change in a one-party state. This article informs these debates by investigating environmental NGOs focused on the environmental education of children and young people in Beijing. By tracing how and which values environmental NGOs aim to instil in the current generation of school and university students, I discuss their role in working towards an alternative development model and explain their strategies for change. I show that, instead of providing radical alternatives to mainstream development models or political processes, they ride on extant societal and governmental narratives about good citizenship and moral values. Rather than seeking to applaud or dismiss these ENGOs potential for radical social transformation, however, this article argues for a change in paradigm in NGO research that is attuned to non-radical or 'mainstream' approaches to societal transformations.

KEYWORDS: place; environmentalism; students; China

Introduction

Beginning with a 1987 World Development brief titled, 'Development Alternatives: The Challenge of NGOs', academic debate on NGOs has focused on assessing whether or not they provide any real alternatives to the established governmental and economic order (see, for instance: Lewis and Wallace, 2000, Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008, Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington, 2007). The breadth of topics and problems covered in such work is vast, but what underlie the discussions over the past decades are two interrelated themes: one surrounding the positionality of NGOs vis a vis governments and corporations, and the second one questioning NGO impact.

Scholars concerned with the role of NGOs classically base their viewpoint on the belief that NGOs are 'only NGOs in any politically meaningful sense of the term if they are offering alternatives to dominant models, practices and ideas about development' (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008:3). This line of enquiry has analysed the relationship between NGOs and governments and/or corporate actors, and suggests that NGOs themselves have become co-opted into the 'neo-liberal cause' (Shivji, 2007), mainstreamed, corporatized or even corrupted and power-hungry (Bristow, 2008; Jarvik, 2007). The second line of enquiry is concerned with NGO impact, either because researchers question the effectiveness of work conducted by NGOs or because NGOs struggle to secure funding when the impact of their work is difficult to measure (see, for instance: Edwards & Hulme, 1992; Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008). Researchers also argue, however, for the continued importance of NGOs in bringing about change (Nelson and Dorsey, 2003; Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008). In a recent special issue in *Development and Change*, Harcourt responds to scholars who question NGO relevance in political activism by tracing the role of the International Women

Federation and outlining its continued influence in feminist political activism (Harcourt, 2013).

Bebbington's, Hickey's, and Mitlin's (2008) work on NGO roles in development, 'Can NGOs make a difference?', implies not one but multiple issues that researchers of developmental and environmental non-governmental organisations face. The authors wonder how to define an NGO, at what point NGO impact can be labelled as truly having 'made a difference' and, once these two entities are sufficiently defined, under what circumstances and with what kind of strategies NGOs can continue to make a difference in this world. In the past two decades, these two broad questions have also underpinned research on environmental NGOs (ENGOs): one surrounding the positionality of NGOs vis-à-vis governments and corporations, and the second questioning NGO performance and accountability (Bryant, 2009). This is due to increasing institutionalisation, and to the co-operation of ENGOs with governments and corporate actors, as well as to growing interest in and access to financial reports by ENGO donors (Jepson, 2005).

Although the ENGO focus on reform rather than confrontation may be seen as a new strength and opportunity, it also puts them in the spotlight on issues of governance, accountability and partnerships (Sustainability, 2003). Scholars question both the effectiveness of ENGOs in the sphere of international and national policymaking, as well as the norms and interests that drive their work (Kellow, 2000; Chartier and Deléage, 1998, Biliouri, 1999; Wright, 2000; Mason, 2004). Scholars of ENGOs across the globe have trouble defining what 'being an environmental NGO' actually entails, since conservation or sustainability campaigns are not necessarily alternative or progressive simply because they are organised by a not-for-profit organisation. Given ENGO development from largely elitist conservation groups to globally operating mass organisations – such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth – as well as vast

differences in ENGO activity in the global north and the global south, ambiguities in research are unsurprising. ENGO action in developing countries in particular has been linked to developmental and political debates.

In scholarship on ENGOs in China, the political efficacy of ENGOs is also among the most predominant themes. Ma (2006), for instance, states that NGOs in China are 'the most vibrant forces in expanding societal space and power and changing China's institutional landscapes' (Ma, 2006: 207), only to continue by saying that, actually, they have 'not yet had a substantial political voice' (*ibid*). In summary, those concerned with the role and relevance of NGOs tend to be concerned with investigating the political standpoints of NGOs and with the measurable impact of their activities.

Rather than seeking to applaud or to dismiss the potential of ENGOs for radical social transformation, this article argues for a change in paradigm in NGO research that is attuned to non-radical or 'mainstream' approaches to societal transformations. The following will trace the strategies and political standpoints of ENGOs in China, with a particular focus on organisations which concentrate their efforts on youth environmental education. I argue that the case of Chinese ENGOs campaigning for environmental awareness amongst China's youth showcases the radical long-term potential of making an NGO mission 'mainstream'. Questions of effectiveness and positionality of ENGOs in China are not fruitfully assessed against normative notions of NGO roles as bringers of alternative development models and democratisation. Rather, their attempt to insert themselves into the education system and into mainstream youth culture should be assessed for what it is: an attempt to spread environmental awareness – and a culture of individual responsibility for the environment – in a political climate that makes any type of NGO work increasingly difficult.

This article challenges conventional approaches to assessing the value of NGOs. I argue that embedding an NGO mission into established societal and political culture – instead of offering an alternative to the establishment – can, paradoxically, have far more radical consequences than those brought about by an oppositional stance.

Role of ENGOs in China

China's economic development success over the past 30 years has been much-heralded by both its own people and by the international community. Rapid growth and industrialisation naturally came at a price – vast resource depletion and high pollutant emission (Zhang and Wen, 2007; Economy, 2004) – threatening the economic and social foundations of its new-found modernisation (Morton, 2005). This mode of growth must now be balanced with a focus on environmental sustainability: a task that the government alone cannot fulfil. Ho (2001) notes that 'the Chinese state is facing a dilemma. In order to ensure sustained and stable socio-economic development it cannot escape from strengthening civil society and allowing the rise of grassroots organisations' (Ho, 2001: 906).

Recognising the need for support on this developmental front, the government has allowed ENGOs to form, and to act on behalf of sustainable development and the protection of resources and wildlife (Schwartz, 2004; Li and Dong, 2010). Although their areas of expertise and action repertoires are manifold (nature conservation, environmental education, species protection, environmental impact assessments, legal advice to pollution victims and many more), their potential to mobilise popular awareness and protest has aroused, by far, the most interest in the academic community. Much like the dilemma confronted by scholars of development NGOs and ENGOs worldwide, researchers of Chinese ENGOs are concerned with the political efficacy of ENGOs and with their potential for spearheading social and

political transformations (Yang, 2005; Ho, 2001; Ho and Edmonds, 2007, Cooper, 2006; Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

Despite being awarded much praise for their engagement with both polity and society, most scholars are hesitant to judge ENGOs as either agents of change or as co-opted helpers of the government. Instead, Ho and Edmonds (2007) coined the term 'embedded activism' to describe ENGO strategy, suggesting that – rather than a co-optation – environmental activism by ENGOs and other actors is a form of 'negotiated symbiosis' between activists and the government which, although not outrightly oppositional, has yielded impressive results (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). Scholarly debate seeks to explore whether or not this 'embedded activism' is, in fact, embedded in the political process – and influential in it – or if this approach to environmental protection has 'robbed the environmental movement of the opportunity, and immediate urgency to confront the government' (Ho, 2001: 893). Zhang and Barr (2013) suggest, for instance, that these ENGOs are 'conformist rebels' (Zhang and Barr, 2013: 5) which are able to instrumentalise the government from the bottom up. To assess the full potential of ENGO engagement, it is crucial to consider how their messages are taught, understood and developed further by the younger generation.

Yang and Calhoun (2007) note that the environmental movement's main constituency consists of students, intellectuals, journalists, professionals, and other types of urbanities. [University] student environmental associations are a main part of the movement' (Yang and Calhoun, 2007: 214). The widespread participation of young people in environmental movements – high school and university students, in particular – has attracted research on their numbers, organisational structure and related developments such as regional youth environmental organisations (Yang, 2005; Wu, 2006; Lu, 2003). Environmental student associations and regional youth environmental organisations have been praised for

providing next-generation officials, teachers, entrepreneurs, reporters and NGO leaders with strong organisational skills, as well as with environmental passion and environmental literacy (Lu, 2003; Wu, 2006). Student cooperation with ENGOs has also been charted and applauded due to successful initiatives such as the Yunnan anti-dam protests and several conservation campaigns. Some ENGOs have made students (including students from primary schools, secondary schools and university) the main focus of their campaign efforts, and are seeking to embed environmental education into mainstream schooling.

Education and youth focused ENGOs

The government has made initial steps towards integrating environmental education into mainstream education through projects such as the 'Secondary and Elementary School Environmental Education Implementation Guide', mandated by the Ministry of Education in 2003, and written in cooperation with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Although the integration of environmental education (EE) into the general curriculum was mandated by the government, teacher training is dependent on ENGOs such as the WWF, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and the Jane Goodall Institute China. Despite efforts to make EE an integral part of Chinese schooling, the education system remains based on exam-focused teaching, especially the university entrance exam – which integrates very few questions on environmental education (McBeath and McBeath, 2011). School textbooks have been revised to include elements of EE in all relevant subjects, but teacher training and nationwide incorporation of these new textbooks is a gradual process and will take years to complete (Lin and Ross, 2006).

According to Lin and Ross's (2006) study on the state of environmental education in China, the implementation of the government's mandate was hindered by both funding obstacles and

by teacher unwillingness, indifference or, simply, inability to enforce it. Therefore, effectively, ENGOs are the only actors in the educational field who are currently pushing and setting the environmental educational agenda. In integrating environmental education into mainstream public schools, 'they face a number of challenges including coordination with the development priorities of local governments (and) securing funding' (Li and Dong, 2010: 6). This lack of environmental education in school and university was evident in my interviews with students and ENGO staff throughout my research. If students had any environmental awareness before entering university – and joining the local SEA – parental influence and television news were cited as the main sources of information. There currently exists close to no general prior basis of environmental education which ENGOs can build upon, except that which they themselves are now teaching to the younger years.

Economy (2004), in particular, notes the significance of the younger generation of environmental activists in shaping the environmental movement's trajectory, suggesting that these young activists are 'open and aggressive' (Economy, 2004: 166). Her work traces the life trajectories and political attitudes of activists who have already developed high profiles within the environmental movement. However, there is little research on the strategies and political views of ENGOs that have made it their explicit aim to inspire youth to join the environmental cause. The values that ENGOs try to instil in these young people – and the brand of environmentalism which they are trying to teach – however, remain largely unexplored areas of research.

In order to place student involvement in environmental movements in the context of its political and social significance, it is necessary to explore how ENGOs attempt to catalyse students' potential as modern environmentalists. The Nu river campaign, as well as various animal protection campaigns, has shown the potential for mass action on the part of students

(Lu, 2003). This article, therefore, examines how ENGOs aim to enrol Chinese students in their fight for sustainable development and in the protection of the environment. I analyse, in particular, how these ENGOs position themselves vis a vis the government and established societal values and discourse. In doing so, I push for an assessment of ENGO work that focuses on the core of their mission – in this case, spreading environmentalism – without judging their work against their alleged responsibility to confront established power structures and to offer alternatives.

The following analysis of the teachings of ENGOs will focus on three Beijing-based ENGOs in particular. It will explore, first, why these organisations have decided to target the country's youth, what they teach them, and how. I trace their effectiveness in spreading environmental awareness and in influencing societal discourse – as well as governmental policies. Rather than lamenting their lack of controversial and contentious activism, or judging ENGOs as corporatized and co-opted, this study suggests that the truly radical potential of the work of ENGOs may lie in their attempt to make environmentalism 'mainstream'. This non-politicised type of environmental activism is focused on providing youth with an alternative vision of citizen-environment relations, and monetary versus moral gains in career and lifestyle choices.

By seeking to embed environmentalist values in extant societal and governmental narratives, ENGOs are aiming to create a broad and continuously growing audience for their message. Their effectiveness lies in this alignment and cooperation – rather than in confrontation with governmental bodies. This may, however, limit their role as agents of democratic change, as it strengthens young people's impressions that, ultimately, the government is the only actor that has the power to effect broad-scale change. This research contributes to academic debate on the role of Chinese ENGOs in social transformations – but, also, larger scholarly debates on

the positionality and effectiveness of NGOs. In particular, I hope to move the discussion away from a constant re-evaluation of the role of ENGOs as bringers of democracy, civil society and alternative development models, and suggest instead that researchers should consider the possibility that by embedding NGO missions in mainstream culture – by employing, rather than opposing, political and societal discourse – they may prove a truly radical force for change in a world threatened by environmental degradation and climate change.

Research focus

For this research, I interviewed 50 students and young professionals in Beijing, China. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, and were complemented by participant observation, 'hanging out time' and informal chats as well as pictorial evidence. Out of the 50 respondents, 35 were students who were reading for an undergraduate degree at a university in Beijing, or were visiting Beijing for an internship as part of their university degree somewhere else. I interviewed students from all years (1–3 or, for some degrees, 1–4). All students were enrolled in either a campus-based student environmental association (SEA), or they were working for ENGOs around the city. I also interviewed their bosses and colleagues at these NGOs. With the exception of 5 of them, all students and young professionals were only children, and about 40 of them had moved to Beijing from another city. Most students were enrolled at either the Beijing Forestry University or the Beijing Jiaotong University. Degrees read included – but were not limited to: Transport Studies, Logistics, Information Technology, Forest Management, Engineering, Environmental Engineering, Wood Science, Social Studies, Media and Languages.

The Beijing-based youth ENGO that is the main focus of this article is the 'Jane Goodall Institute' (JGI), active since 1994 with its Roots and Shoots programme. JGI's Roots and

Shoots (R&S) programme is an environmental education and empowerment programme, operating nationwide in both primary and secondary schools as well as universities. JGI offices in Beijing, Chengdu and Shanghai support over 600 R&S groups based in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and universities. For comparative value and a more comprehensive picture of ENGO teachings, this article will also introduce the 'China Youth Climate Action Network' (CYCAN), founded in 2007, and the 'Green Student Forum' (GSF), founded in 1996 – both of which have also made school and university students the chosen audience for their environmental education campaigns. CYCAN's target audience is school and university students across China, with offices in Beijing and Guangzhou and approximately 300 schools and universities participating in CYCAN activities. The GSF headquarters are in Beijing but they work with nearly 270 student environmental groups in universities across the country. My own research is complemented by a survey conducted by JGI China on student participation in environmental protection activities.

Embedding ENGO messages in societal discourse –'it is not just picking up litter!'

In order to discuss the effectiveness of ENGO action, it is necessary to first establish what these ENGOs are trying to achieve. All three ENGOs cite the environmental education of China's youth as the core of their missions. 'China's future depends, in part, on the abilities of youth to cultivate ethics in leadership, take collective action, and create innovative and culturally appropriate solutions to social and environmental problems' (Johnson, Johnson-Pynn and Pynn, 2007 citing Cen and Li, 2006). This outlook underpins all three ENGO approaches to environmental education. They see the current generation of young people as being future leaders and main stakeholders in China's environmental future. In interviews with the heads of each organisations and with staff at R&S, GSF and CYCAN, students' potential future roles in business, government, academia and the non-profit sector were

frequently-noted motivations for ENGOs to focus on this group of society. R&S staff stressed that, contrary to environmental education efforts aimed at the general public, young people were easier to reach and were more flexible in their attitudes and behavioural patterns.

The primary aim of these ENGOs was to increase environmental awareness amongst youth groups, particularly concerning resource usage, recycling, transportation and consumption. To this end, they have come up with a variety of activities aimed at educating and at engaging students of all ages. CYCAN focuses on anti-climate change action through, for instance, involving students in an evaluation of their university's sustainability track record – in regard to electricity and water use or with respect to building insulation – and through student environmental awareness education. Thus, CYCAN aims to bring the climate change conversation 'close to home' and to make students realise that their individual choices are affecting this development.

GSF activities are similarly based around energy and water conservation and recycling initiatives. Their efforts are often accompanied by community outreach programmes and scientific evaluations carried out by the students themselves. In one of their most famous projects, they measured water quality and changes to habitat in Beijing's waterways (Pulver, 2009). The JGI R&S programme takes different shapes depending on whether they are involving high school or university students. In many primary and secondary schools, the environmental education efforts made by ENGOs are aimed at teaching children about pollution and healthy foods, how to look after plants (through creating mini-gardens in or around the school), how to recycle – or, at the very least, to not litter – and, once again, lessons about electricity and water usage. At a university level, R&S staff try to encourage students to set up their own R&S groups on campus which – as with standard student environmental associations – will aim to raise environmental awareness amongst other

students. Additionally, R&S liaise with extant SEAs, support their work through the sharing of their resources – e.g. EE flyers and posters – or invite them to take part in larger R&S events, such as their annual summit and conservation campaign.

However, in order to accomplish their mission to spread environmental awareness, ENGO members have adopted a strategy that addresses students' needs beyond their potential interest in sustainability or the natural environment. In order to reach a larger audience – and to enable student-run environmental groups to do the same – ENGOs try to embed their message and activities in larger societal debates. According to both ENGO staff and students, their efforts coincide with a recent societal and labour market trend that emphasises the provision of voluntary services to society as an unwritten requirement for successful job applications.

The Beijing R&S office sought to understand this phenomenon more deeply, and conducted a report on 'University Students' Attitudes on Community Engagement Activities' (Jane Goodall Institute China, 2013). The survey was conducted with 623 male and 683 female student participants across 18 different provinces and 46 universities. Amongst other uses, three primary areas of focus that the study informed were the assessment of why students chose to take part in community work, what type of work they preferred (environmental groups, helping the elderly/disabled, working with children etc.), and whether or not they had sufficient access to such opportunities.

One of the main findings was that participation in such activities tends to be random – that is, students have no particular interests in mind when they first join, and decisions are based on easy access rather than individual passions. When asked why they join any such activities in the first place, students stressed their willingness to help others and to contribute to society. Additionally, they saw it as a good opportunity to enhance their CV and to gain work

experience and transferable skills for the job market. Student criticism that has emerged from the R&S study – as well as my own research – foregrounds a lack of access to environmental protection groups, 'boring' activities and events, and a perceived lack of impact in relation to student environmental protection activities. A part of the latter viewpoint goes hand-in-hand with the widespread assumption that environmental protection is essentially a fancy term for 'picking up litter'. Even students who were regularly involved in SEA or ENGO action were concerned that they were not having an impact on the students around them.

These findings are reflected in the marketing campaigns of ENGOs. In order to motivate students to choose environmental protection activities as their mode of contribution to society, ENGOs seek to frame participation in these activities as something that a 'good person' would do, and as activities that 'have a direct impact'. To this end, R&S aim to involve popular spokespeople – such as Chinese basketball player, Yao Ming – to openly support their efforts. In their 2013 launch of the 'No Shark Fin Project', R&S also convinced two famous Chinese actors, Huang Haibo and Yang Mi, to be the faces of their campaign. Due to the enormous growth of China's economy and rising income levels, eating shark fin soup has turned from a luxury to a more commonly-eaten delicacy, threatening sharks with extinction. After the launch in Beijing, student groups were asked to encourage their local communities, on or off campus, to sign a pledge to never eat shark fin again. These efforts were complemented by Huang Haibo and Yang Mi taking to Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter), encouraging consumers across China to sign the pledge. According to the R&S Executive Director, the pledge-signing initiative was aimed at counteracting students' impressions that they were not having any real impact.

Two months after the launch, I interviewed the head of R&S China about this campaign. Her evaluation was twofold. On the one hand, she was overwhelmed by the success of the

participation and pledge-signing (over 75,000 signatures had been collected by this point) and was pleased to have gained such prominent supporters. On the other hand, she remained concerned that students were still not fully aware of their own impact and power when it came to issues such as shark-hunting:

> *Students ask me still: what does it have to do with me? Only rich people eat shark fin soup anyway and only at weddings and events like that. I tell them that I want them to be the one person at that wedding that won't eat the soup, that this will send a message. I think some of them understand it. (Executive Director of JGI China, interview, October 2013)*

Although the involvement of celebrities and a focus on active (rather than lecture type) student-run campaigns such as pledge-signing has increased numbers of student participants, the broader impact of such campaigns remains difficult to measure: a problem that is common in the evaluation of environmental education campaigns. The JGI China's 2013 annual report states that 'in response to the growing awareness about the cruelty of consuming shark fin, the Communist Party of China banned shark fin from all state dinners, and public consumption of shark fin over Chinese New Year dropped by 70%' (JGI China, Annual Report 2013, R&S programme). How far such changes can be related back to JGI efforts is difficult to assess, but a more prominent question for JGI staff is whether or not their activities leave a lasting impression on young people. In seeking to impact youth value systems – and behavioural norms beyond one-off campaigns – they wish to embed their messages in students' day-to-day lives and moral discourse: an aim that is challenging to accomplish in an education system that is fiercely competitive, and leaves little room for extracurricular classes or activities.

Not only do JGI staff have to find ways of making their EE activities attractive – JGI campaigns are also frequently side-lined for the benefit of further academic pursuits, which remains a source of intense pressure for students in China (Johnson, Johnson-Pynn and Pynn, 2007: 375). The majority of students at university reported feeling less pressure than they had done during their last two years of school, but also noted time pressure as one of the main constraints on EE activities. The focus on academic pursuits over this particular extracurricular activity is also based on the widespread belief that, essentially, environmental protection activities are a 'service to society' and – though laudable and good for your CV, to some extent – they are not something to be prioritised or pursued full-time. At the same time, this perception of environmentalism is something that these ENGOs wish to strengthen in order to gain more support. By framing environmentalism as a service to society and as something that is good for students' CVs, ENGOs are raising the profile of environmental activism and are combatting views of pro-environmental work as being '*both dirty and tiring'* (Beijing Forestry University, year 2 students, male). However, they struggle to convince young people that such work – and that their own individual behavioural choices in regard to the environment – can have a real and lasting impact.

CYCAN also reported that they have experienced difficulties in maintaining commitment levels beyond one-off events. CYCAN staff attempt to measure the organisation's impact by evaluating how many people have attended their events, but this number is changeable – being dependent on when in the academic year the events are held – and is, thus, not entirely indicative of student interest. In their assessment of impact on campus, SEA students similarly reported difficulties in assessing whether they were really influencing other students. I was frequently told that '*the other students probably don't really care*'. Rather than letting this deter them, however, SEA students decided to focus on making SEA membership a valuable part of students' university years in order to ensure that, at least for SEA members,

environmentalism was more than '*just picking up litter*'. One part-time employee at CYCAN also explained to me that his impression of CYCAN membership was very similar to JGI findings in so far as most students did not initially care about the environment and chose to participate for other reasons. He saw this as an opportunity rather than as a problem, saying that: '*it doesn't matter why they come here, participating can change them. I don't judge*'. Essentially, their aim is to put the environmentalist agenda high on the list of preferred voluntary student services and to paint pro-environmental behaviour as a matter of morality.

GSF staff aim to embed their work in moral discourses as well – by inviting students, for instance, to talks and discussions about societal values and pro-environmental behaviour. These tactics employed in order to embed environmentalism in day-to-day life and in moral discourse are also meant to prolong student commitment to the cause. JGI, GSF and CYCAN staff frequently noted that it was largely unpredictable which students (individuals or groups) would maintain their commitment to campaigning, or even just individual behavioural changes beyond their campaigns. Broadening their current membership base and maintaining commitment to environmental values beyond their events – and university or school years – is central to all of their missions, but is also amongst the hardest facets of their work to predict or to measure. This issue is also evident in their collaboration with the various SEAs across Beijing. All three ENGOs commented that long-term collaboration was often made difficult by the yearly changes in leadership, as well as by high volatility in membership numbers from year to year: a weakness of SEA organisation already noted by Lu's review of SEA development in 2003. Ten years later, CYCAN noted, for instance, that the Beijing University SEA had been one of their most active groups during the past couple of years but had only managed to recruit four new participants in the new academic year (2013-14). The Beijing Forestry University SEA 'Green Finger', however, had managed to gain 80 new members – due, it believed, to a particularly passionate SEA head. All three ENGOs reported that, on

average, participation levels in their students groups and events (both at universities and schools) were increasing every year. The longevity of such participation on campus or at ENGO events – and day-to-day commitment to environmentalist values on the part of the students – is almost impossible to predict. However, rising participation indicates that ENGO attempts to make environmentalism part of mainstream culture have been, at least partly, successful.

Working with the government and ensuring funding

Another strategy employed by ENGOs in order to embed environmentalist values in students' everyday lives is to utilise governmental directives and propaganda. The JGI R&S China Summit made particularly evident how JGI, for instance, aims to capitalise on themes that are already topical in Chinese society, having been promoted by the CCP leadership. On October 19th 2013, students from secondary schools and universities attended the R&S summit in order to introduce their own environmental protection campaigns and, more importantly, to learn about the R&S focus for the coming year. I witnessed the launch of yet another animal protection campaign, this time aimed at the preservation of the African elephant. The summit was called 'I have a dream', hinting at recent efforts by the country's president, Xi Jinping, and both the Department of Propaganda and the Ministry of Culture to steer societal values along the idea of a 'Chinese dream'.

The Chinese dream 'propaganda blitz' (BBC, 2013) – launched by Xi Jinping after his inauguration – was, of course, based on the idea of the American dream, tapping into both Chinese society's admiration for the U.S. and into widespread nationalism. It encourages young people across the country to think up their own dream for China, and JGI was quick to adopt this idea and to utilise it for their own efforts. At the summit, students were asked to

present their ‘green dream for China’. This sort of strategy is widespread in Chinese ENGO work and explains why scholars have coined this type of activism as being ‘embedded’ (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). Using governmental speak to frame the environmentalist cause assures both a good relationship with governmental bodies and, simultaneously, pushes the green agenda as a priority amongst the various dreams for China.

When asked about their relationship with local government and about their political views, members of R&S – but also GSF and CYCAN – said that they did not want their work to be considered political. Instead, they were hoping to engage the government in their efforts and to collaborate as much as possible, as they were convinced that this would serve their cause better than a confrontational stance of any kind. If environmentalists aim to make a real difference, one CYCAN employee told me, they need to have a friendly relationship with both the natural and the human environment. They need to know and to understand their country’s strategies – not just in the environmental realm, but in general. Otherwise, he continued, they would be ‘*the enemies of other humans and ultimately suffer losses*’. Pulver (2009) found the same attitude echoed by the GSF’s Shen Cheng, whom he quotes as saying: the goal of Chinese NGOs is ‘to solve the problem, not increase the conflict’ (Pulver, 2009: 94).

The R&S summit served as a platform to introduce JGI China’s green dream for China – that of the ‘Elephant Dream’. This ‘Elephant Dream’ campaign was aimed at curbing illegal ivory imports into China by raising awareness of its origin and the devastating effects on elephant survival in Africa: a subject that had already been the topic of years of campaigning by the WWF, IFAW and WildAid. At the time of the summit, there were still IFAW posters in the subways and public spaces, featuring an elephant mother with her calf.

The posters read in Chinese (translation by Ge Gabriel, 2010):

"Mom, I got teeth".

The mother does not respond. The calf repeats:

"Mom, I got teeth."

Aren't you happy I've got teeth?"

The message further explains:

Babies having teeth should bring joy to a mother.

But what does it mean for elephant families?

Because of people's unnecessary want of ivory, hundreds and thousands of elephants are killed for the ivory trade.

If we don't buy, they don't die.

Say "No" to elephant ivory.

WildAid posters, on the other hand, were trying to appeal to Chinese nationalistic sentiments with posters featuring a black and white elephant with bleeding tusks, and the slogan *"Protect the pandas of Africa – elephants. When the buying stops the killing can too".*

The use of visual stimuli such as these is a common strategy amongst environmental NGOs (De Luca, 1999, cited in Bryant, 2009); R&S decided to use a BBC documentary clip about a mother and calf losing their herd during a sandstorm, resulting in the calf's death. The clip has no direct relationship to the ivory trade and was evidently used to awaken sympathy and pity for elephant families in general. The presentation that followed the documentary clip introduced students to the current state of elephant poaching, stressing Chinese consumer

demand as the driving factor behind this trend, and urging students to campaign on behalf of the elephants. This R&S campaign simultaneously speaks to three interrelated themes in Chinese society: strong family values (helping the baby elephant), nationalism (working towards a green dream for China), and the wish to be considered a 'good person' and, thereby, improving your CV (spending your free time helping others).

And this is exactly what R&S are aiming to do. By framing participation in their campaign efforts as something that benefits the students on all of these levels, they aim to tie environmental behaviour into moral values that transcend campaign participation, such as the 'no shark fin pledge', or any other one-off environmental protection campaigns. Johnson, Johnson-Pynn and Pynn's (2007) study on R&S school groups also found that 'R&S's orientation toward community service, character development, and social responsibility is culturally congruent with Chinese collectivist values and also modern goals for youth's moral development (e.g. service for the good of the whole)' (Johnson, Johnson-Pynn and Pynn, 2007: 378). The success of this strategy is visible in the growing number of schools that approach R&S staff for co-operation: a trend that, according to R&S, is born out of the impression that an affiliation with R&S raises a school's profile and improves its competitiveness. CYCAN staff also explained that they were trying to relate environmental topics to larger issues in order to increase their reach. According to prominent young environmental activist and journalist Huo Weiya, CYCAN's focus on climate change is, in fact, born of the government's climate change programme, unveiled in June 2007. Huo states that: 'youth activism cannot be separated from the Chinese government's own stance on climate change' (Huo, 2007).

Their apolitical and strictly non-confrontational stance has also helped both CYCAN and the Jane Goodall Institute to receive funding and support from international corporations and

organisations. The Jane Goodall Institute has received funding from foreign corporate actors such as Chevron, Volkswagen, Bayer and Hewlett Packard. CYCAN has also received direct support and funding from a variety of international environmental organisations – like the US-based 'Global Green Grants Fund' – and Chinese sources, like the CCAN (China Climate Action Network), China Merchants Property Development, and the Guandong based Yu Foundation. Both foreign and Chinese companies have an interest in marketing themselves as responsible corporate actors without risking any form of politicisation of their work. In fact, companies such as Bayer see their support of the Jane Goodall Institute as part of a partnership with both NGOs and governmental actors (Mitchell, 2008).

In exchange, the Jane Goodall Institute receives much needed 'corporate pro bono services and public relations work, (…) crucial donations of office equipment and even rent-free office space. It also offers sponsorship packages for corporations to contribute to founder Jane Goodall's annual tour of China' (Buckley, 2007). On the issue of funding and expanding their operations, the head of JGI Shanghai said in 2009 – when the government initiated the first round of stricter controls and restrictions on NGO funding: "We're non-confrontational, non-political, non-religious. Don't create any waves. If you want to be effective in China you have to stay on the path." (Cooper, 2010). In another interview, she also stressed that 'activists are viewed positively by the government as long as they stay within the government's positive side. The minute their cause is no longer advocated, they go to jail. We will take slow, small positive steps forward in the environmental arena within the system and this approach is more sustainable.' (*ibid*). It is precisely this strategy that allows other NGOs – as well as local and foreign organisations – to fund the work of these ENGOs without taking the risks that such investments will backfire, harming or hindering their own operations in China.

Changing ideas of a 'good life'

In recent years, all three ENGOs have seen a rise in membership that they believe is driven by students seeking to enhance their job market prospects. This development has led to the emergence of a second target – that of changing young people's perspectives on desirable career options and future lifestyle choices. That is, rather than merely changing behavioural norms directly related to their impact on the environment, these ENGOs are also hoping to change young people's value norms regarding 'successful adulthood'. They try to prepare volunteers for a career in the non-profit sector, making internships and volunteering as fun as possible by immediately giving new participants real responsibilities within their organisations.

Student volunteers at CYCAN and GSF were particularly enthusiastic about this method, telling me that it meant that they really felt part of the team – that there were no hierarchies; everyone was nice and helpful, and they genuinely enjoyed being there. Comments such as these became all the more believable to me when I realised that most of the interns, for instance (there were 10 at GSF and 13 at CYCAN), spent not only their holidays in the office but also dedicated most of their weekends to the projects. CYCAN tries to take on as many interns as they can since these students are seen as particularly potent messengers of their mission – both at their respective universities, and throughout their careers: 'Out of 100 interns, if each one influences only ten people, that's already a thousand people reached!' (CYCAN employee).

Additionally, of course, CYCAN and GSF hope to inspire students to apply for jobs in the field of environmental protection. The career trajectories of their own staff evidence the salience of this approach, as most GSF and CYCAN employees in the Beijing offices had

carried out internships there before their formal employment and – despite having different careers in mind originally – decided to stay on as full-time or part-time staff. GSF goes further than this by trying to show students options for 'green careers' outside the official NGO world. At the bi-weekly GSF talks – at an NGO-run 'Youth Space' in the centre of the university district – GSF invites staff from corporations and think tanks to talk to students about possibilities for pushing sustainable development from within a company. I attended a talk by a former WWF employee who had become the head of corporate responsibility at Coca-Cola China. He spent an hour explaining his role at Coca-Cola and giving students examples of opportunities for pro-environmental improvements in the production chains of such corporate giants. The head of GSF said that this type of work was at the very core of GSF's mission: to help students to realise that – no matter what they were interested in, and where they ended up working – there were always opportunities to help the environment.

Although their everyday work does not focus on motivating students to work in the non-profit sector, the head of R&S also considers changing perceptions of 'the good life' to be a major part of their mission. Some former R&S participants do go on to work in a field related to environmental protection, and cite their time at R&S as the main motivator behind this career choice. The Executive Director of JGI China explained to me that being a 'Goldman Sachs banker' still remained the ideal career that most students aspired to pursue. She also stated that she had no clear strategy in mind on how to change this. To gain a fuller picture of the impact of GSF, CYCAN and R&S on students' career wishes, I included views of NGO careers in my interviews with university students. As ENGO staff had predicted, the majority of students did not perceive NGO work as a viable career option. This was due to two main reasons. First, students were often unaware that you could work in the NGO sector; the possibility simply had not occurred to them. Second, there was a general assumption that NGO salaries were significantly lower than elsewhere. This is congruent with Li and Dong's

(2010) findings that the general public still lacks cultural familiarity with NGOs, keeping them – in some respects – at the margins of society. Reported salaries of ENGO workers were not lower than those of their peers of the same age (respondents had been in the ENGO sector from between 1 and 10 years). However, all respondents that had not yet started a family voiced concerns over future salary progression, saying that – at some point – they would have to look for another job that would offer better rates of pay.

The variety of methods used by ENGOs to get their message across is impressive and, according to their membership numbers, has attracted a continuous rise in interest in participation in their work. All three ENGOs have expanded – not only in Beijing itself, but across the country – through co-operation with SEAs as well as through students setting up their own local R&S or CYCAN groups. Also, as is evident through my interviews with students and ENGO staff, ENGO work does help to alert students to the possibility of working in the NGO sector. Nevertheless, their relatively recent emergence in Chinese society – coupled with their collaborative approach to dealing with governmental agencies – may downplay the urgency and importance of their work in the eyes of students and teachers. As a result of this situation, even amongst those committed to environmental protection across university years, there exists a persistent doubt as to the efficacy of ENGO action within the student body.

Another limiting factor is the unpredictability of the matter of students' long-term commitment to the environmentalist agenda. Of the student environmental associations on Beijing's university campuses that were mentioned to me by CYCAN and R&S staff as being particularly active and interesting, two were already the main focus of my research: the Beijing Jiaotong University SEA, and the Beijing Forestry University SEA. Amongst the SEA members at Jiaotong University, even those who had taken up roles of responsibility

within the SEA did not have much knowledge of current ENGO programmes, campaigns, and of their own opportunities to participate. They did, however, report very active engagement with R&S – as well as 'Friends of Nature' in earlier years – reiterating, effectively, what ENGO staff had already told me about the high fluctuation in ENGO and SEA collaboration.

Other students felt that they should prioritise the work that their SEA was already doing on campus. A student from Renmin University – who had joined the Renmin University CYCAN group – poignantly expressed what many of the other respondents touched upon: '*I joined because I thought it sounded really interesting what they were doing but in the end there was just lots of talk and nothing ever happened*' (Pengjun, graduate of Renmin University). There existed, in his mind, a discrepancy between the passionate talks and dreams of the ENGO members, and the actual – realistic – changes that they could achieve. Although the idea of 'making a difference' appealed to him, he concluded that – in the end – only the government really had the capacity to change anything, and did not see ENGO work as relevant to this process. The majority of students – according to my own research, as well as to the assessments offered by ENGO staff – thought that it was ultimately the government's responsibility to clean up the environment and that they were not currently doing this because they had to prioritise the economy. Effectively, by working within government guidelines and according to government rhetoric, ENGOs run the risk of being viewed as superfluous by the students who they try to reach. 'In the end, it may not be the achievement of their goals that "kills off" NGOs as a distinctive actor, but rather the fact that many of them were simply not seen to be 'wild' enough by a new generation' (Bryant, 2009: 1552).

ENGO effectiveness and positionality

These ENGOs, therefore, face a predicament that is highlighted in research on the Chinese environmental movement in general. Where Ho and Edmonds (2007) suggest that, possibly, 'embedded activism' is but a transient phase in Chinese ENGO activism, Bryant calls this type of NGO–government symbiosis a 'Faustian bargain' (Bryant, 2009: 1548), and Zhang and Barr (2013) suggest that, actually, ENGOs in China are 'beating the government at its own game' (Zhang and Barr, 2013: 45). An evaluation of youth-focused ENGOs – such as R&S, CYCAN and GSF – is necessarily confronted by the same issues as those experienced in evaluating ENGO positionality vis-à-vis the government.

From this research, it appears that – rather than trying to provide a 'true alternative' to established institutions and discourse – these ENGOs are evidently trying to do quite the opposite: they are attempting to become 'mainstream', and they are doing so based on the idea that any sort of 'radical alternative' essentially threatens their ability to make a difference. Although they do not campaign or work on exactly the same issues, GSF, CYCAN and R&S all have environmental protection and sustainability at the core of their missions. By educating students of all ages on these issues, they are trying to involve society's young from an early age, and to incorporate environmental awareness into their day-to-day behavioural norms, attitudes and value systems. Given the relatively slow top-down approach to implementing environmental education and protection on the part of the government, the work of these ENGOs seems invaluable.

Although it is not overtly critical of existing political and institutional processes, this type of ENGO engagement may still hold the potential to catalyse societal change – more so, even, than contentious activism might, since 'nongovernmental organisations are relatively new in

China and they are still viewed with some suspicion by community members and government institutions alike' (Johnson, Johnson-Pynn and Pynn, 2007: 376). Rather than making them more 'suspicious', these ENGOs are trying to raise their profiles as supporters of both citizens and the government in fighting environmental degradation, and promote themselves as potential employers to university graduates. The major challenge with which they are faced is to change students' perceptions of what environmentalism is, what it means to work with ENGOs (whether as a volunteer or on a full-time basis) and, most importantly, why ENGOs matter. Since they are using state and societal rhetoric to mobilise support for their campaigns – rather than criticising the extant system – they struggle to clarify exactly why participating in their work is necessary, despite the existence of an already, allegedly, 'good government'. Since the value and lifestyle changes proposed by the ENGOs are not overtly radical, students tend to continue to attribute ultimate responsibility for the environment to the government, challenging ENGOs to inspire broad-based, long-term commitment to their cause.

If we apply the standard research paradigm – questioning ENGO effectiveness and positionality – the resultant picture of the work of these ENGOs in the political realm is both promising, in regard to their role as environmental educators, and sobering – in respect of the part that they might play in transforming the Chinese socio-political landscape into a more democratic and participatory system. ENGO effectiveness in broadening membership and reaching wider audiences has hinged, so far, on continued alignment with established governmental and societal discourse. Yet, as long as ENGOs in China avoid all political confrontation, their actions are supporting a political system that does not ultimately encourage or ask for citizen participation. As such, they may struggle to inspire long-term commitment to their cause, as citizens continue to consider the government to be fundamentally responsible for the environment. Ho and Edmonds (2007) suggest that this 'embedded activism' is but a transient phase and that the use of radical and confrontational

tactics by environmentalists is a mere matter of time. However, as ENGOs are also the most important facilitators of environmental education and campaigning in schools and universities, they are teaching this mode of activism to the next generation of environmentalists, possibly prolonging their current mode of operation. This may serve the environmentalist agenda by making it more 'mainstream', but it could also undermine any future potential for them to be agents of democratic change.

Although these ENGO missions are neither politically contentious nor overtly radical in their approach to spreading environmental awareness, this research speaks to scholarship concerned with the ability of ENGOs to provide true alternatives to the established development mode (Bebbington, Hickey and Mitlin, 2008). It calls into questions our benchmarks for judging ENGO action, particularly in the face of an authoritarian government. In his contribution to 'Can NGOs make a difference', Edwards outlines the difficulties inherent in trying to 'judge' NGOs in any sort of measurable way and suggests that, instead, scholars can really only ask themselves 'whether NGOs 'did the right thing' on the really big issues of our times' (Edwards, 2008: 46). Climate change, environmental degradation and pollution – as well as associated health risks – are amongst the biggest issues in contemporary China.

ENGOs such as CYCAN, GSF and R&S are ostensibly among the most effective actors in empowering students to become more environmentally-aware and to change behavioural norms and attitudes. The WWF co-drafted the mandate for environmental education with the Chinese government and was responsible for the initial steps taken in order to incorporate it into mainstream schooling. R&S has provided environmental education training to 10,000 teachers since its foundation in 1994. Arguably, without such ENGOs, EE would still not be on the school agendas. If ENGOs continue to broaden their membership base – and succeed in

pushing the environmental education agenda onto the general school curriculum – then the process of making environmentalism mainstream rather than radical may, paradoxically, have a much more radical outcome than that which would result from risking confrontation and repression.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored concepts associated with – and provided an original analysis of – student environmentalism in Beijing, while taking forward scholarship in four areas of academic enquiry: young people's agency and activism, the relationship between space and the body in polluted environments; place based environmentalism; and the role, positionality and effectiveness of ENGOs.

Environmental protests and campaigns are central to scholarly debate surrounding the potential for democratisation and social movement theory in China (Yang, 2005; Cooper, 2006; Xie and van der Heijden, 2010; Economy, 2004). Students are amongst the main constituents of environmental protection campaigns, and student environmental associations have been set up on all major Chinese university campuses. The Chinese government has sought to influence students' political values through embedding party propaganda in formal schooling and monitoring students through surveillance by university staff and members of the Communist Youth League (Vickers, 2009; Steinfeld, 2015). Extant literature has hailed students as major contributors to the environmental movement and lauded their participation in environmental campaigns (Yang, 2005; Lu, 2003; Wu, 2006) - yet, scholarship to date has not provided an in-depth account of the norms and values guiding young people's involvement in environmental campaigning or their relationship to the Chinese Communist Party. Student engagement in these activities suggests a search for values by Chinese youth that has not been satisfactorily highlighted or explained in existing literature. In light of the centrality of student protests and political engagement to socio-political transformation across the world, an exploration of Chinese students' political outlooks is critical to our understanding of contemporary youth politics. How this generation of Chinese youth engages with the natural environment is also crucial for the environmental sustainability and health of

a country that is facing levels of environmental degradation and destruction that current laws and policies alone cannot seem to counteract.

Findings from my research indicate a diversity of behavioural norms and attitudes amongst young people that should make us reluctant to readily apply broad-stroke characterisations and generalisations about this generation of Chinese youth. What emerges from my research on both students and young people working in ENGOs is a tendency to emphasise non-oppositional agency and their rejection of contentious politics. The Chinese student activisms of the twentieth century have abated. What is emerging in their place, however, is not an apolitical generation. Findings from this project have demonstrated that, instead, a new era of student civic participation is developing at Chinese university campuses and in NGOs – that is not satisfactorily analysed through extant academic lenses. The political views and action repertoires of Chinese students that have been investigated for this study challenge findings from previous research projects on young people's activism and agency in other parts of the world.

My analysis of how these students balance environmental health risks and plans for the future further underlines the diversity of factors shaping their approach to activism and environmentalism. This thesis has outlined the factors shaping such inconsistencies and takes forward existing academic analysis – of both activism in general and environmental activism in particular – and expands our understanding of people's responses to pollution by exploring the relationship between space and the body in polluted environments. Findings of this project fall into the following fields of scholarly debate: young people's activism and agency; environmental health and youth studies; environmentalism; and the role and impact of environmental non-governmental organisation (ENGOs) in furthering environmental policy

and political change. The following will summarise findings, discern the theoretical contributions made, and indicate possible avenues for future research to pursue.

In this thesis, I traced whether students' involvement in environmental campaigning indicates a politicisation of Chinese youth. Open protest action is a widespread and increasingly growing aspect of the environmental movement in China. Although protests are generally localised and often judged to have purely Nimbyist agendas, they are indicative of the potential for environmental problems to spark contentious protest action. In light of recent youth uprisings across the globe, the first paper explores the possibility of political action on the part of young environmentalists in Beijing through the lens of recent theoretical contributions to youth activism and agency such as the 'Activisms 2010+' debate and works by Dyson (2014), Mahmood (2005) and Daly (2010) on alternative forms of youth activism and agency. Findings from this research indicate varying levels of politicisation that are not satisfactorily captured through existing labels of youth activism and agency. The case study of Chinese university students clearly evidences the limits of current labels and conceptualisations, and I have suggested that their activism is 'fragmented', allowing us to see the broad spectrum of politicisation underlying youth environmental activism.

Whilst social and political backgrounds vary immensely among environmental activists, students are not generally ambivalent to or unaware of the socio-political processes behind pollution or towards state censoring and monitoring of their activities. Whilst some students support the CCP government and see their environmental action as aligned with government work, others are keenly aware of the government's shortcomings in protecting the environment, and they object to state efforts aimed at monitoring students and SEA work in particular. All these students are united, however, in their fear of chaos and a belief that certain levels of government control are necessary. Irrespective of political or social

background, students are opposed to protest action, which they consider to be destabilising to society; it is seen as particularly undesirable given recent evidence from uprisings in other countries that has led to *luan* (chaos). Students who do not wish to support the CCP may try to circumvent campus authorities by utilising other channels for funding and networking with teachers, but they largely stay within state-sanctioned parameters to further the environmentalist cause. Rather than hoping for an oppositional force to emerge, students aim to be part of a reform solution that might, ultimately, lead to political reform.

Student environmentalism in China is, therefore, neither a form of activism that is part of the Activisms 2010+ scholarship nor, however, does it signal a lack of political interest among Chinese youth. SEA students are not generally ambivalent towards causes beyond their individual pursuits or towards politics, and many of them object to being monitored and censored by campus authorities. However, they do not consider opposition and contentious politics to be desirable solutions to the problems inherent in the one-party state. The limits imposed on their activities are a source of anger and frustration for some and, simultaneously, something that they accept as necessary for social stability. Thus, rather than rebelling against these constraints or deserting the environmentalist cause because of it, students choose to continue working within these parameters, thereby ensuring SEA and ENGO survival and growth. Paradoxically, then, those who object to CCP rule up aligning strategies with those students who are pro-regime by focusing on non-politicised, issue-specific campaigning which avoids confrontation with the state – leading to the development of a group of activists who are united in their approach to environmental activism despite highly diverse political opinions. On the surface, this may seem to be in line with Dyson's (2014) or Mahmood's (2005) findings that we need to make room for alternative conceptions of freedom and see the act of bowing to hierarchies as a form of 'active quiescence' (Dyson, 2014) rather than suppression. Yet, I argue that it is close to impossible for a researcher to assign such a thing as

'active quiescence' to young people's agency, especially in politically repressive environments – how can we judge whether 'quiescence' is an actively chosen path unless we can prove that the individual in question feels enabled, equally, to rebel? Only if rebellion is an option – and quiescence is chosen nonetheless – could we possibly call this quiescence 'active'.

I argue, therefore, that whilst students are united in their fear of chaos and, consequentially, embrace the notion of control – at least to a degree – this reaction is borne neither of a full approval of the established power system nor a clear rejection of it. I suggest that neither global value systems, as proposed in 'Activisms 2010+', nor 'active quiescence' capture contemporary youth activism in agency. Instead, researchers should acknowledge the vast varieties of political and societal beliefs and value systems – and various responses to repression mechanisms – that can underlie forms of activism, whether it is environmental activism, the Occupy movement, or a Mosque movement in Egypt. The young environmentalists introduced in this study showcase a highly diverse set of political beliefs and equally diverse understandings of – and desires for – freedom. These young people are united, for a time, in their fight for a greening of the environment, yet this activism is fragmented in terms of both aims and values underlying environmental action, as well as in long-term unity and strategy. "Fragmented Activism" may not offer the sort of clear-cut picture of movement membership that is appealing in our analysis of larger societal trends – but it is likely to be closer to the truth.

Having also outlined students' responses to air pollution, both in their everyday behaviour and in their activism, this thesis suggests that the notion of relational space (Massey, 2005; Harvey, 2004) is a highly instructive lens for researchers who are interested in people's responses to pollution. Focusing on the relationship between space and the body has allowed

me to show both the influence of power (in this case, of the municipal government) on the construction of urban space and the pervasive pollution it is filled with; it also let me show how the body itself is constructed in relation to this space. By showing this interplay, students' main coping mechanisms are revealed as being directed at discursively marginalising the risk associated with pollution, rather than raising awareness and seeking ways to protect themselves in physical ways.

This approach to the study of people's responses to pollution offers an additional tool to those interested in the study of environmental and occupational health. However, it also adds a new element to the study of spatiality in general. Air pollution is a pervasive source of risk, and exposure to polluted space is essentially also a marker of power – and social and economic – imbalances. In Beijing, foreigners and the financial and governing elite are able to buy air filters for almost all of the spaces that they inhabit, and they can wear masks for the journeys in between. Being able to carve out spaces with clean air is a privilege of the rich and powerful, even with a matter like air pollution which – unlike diamond dust, for instance – seemingly affects an entire city, irrespective of profession, age, social status, gender et cetera. Yet, those who can afford it have the luxury to create their own space within the wider urban space, and can focus on avoiding exposure rather than 'avoiding the fear of it'. As such, for those interested in studying relational space, environmental health risks should be another factor taken into account when assessing how spatiality shapes and is shaped by power imbalances.

Given the inconsistencies undergirding students' environmental action as highlighted by the case of air pollution, this study has also offered an analysis of students' environmental critique and action. Findings from this research reveal that, although university restrictions are crucial in maintaining student activism within campus boundaries, this is not the only reason

for students' focus on campus life and its natural environment. Rather, students' strategies are also born of their understanding of environmental issues, and reflect a romanticisation of nature and understanding of environmental protection as a matter of morality. Whilst this reflects contradictions to environmentalism similar to those observed by researchers of environmental movements elsewhere (Smith, 2001; Peterson del Mar, 2012), I have shown that research on place based environmentalism needs to move beyond a normative and idealistic vision of environmental action and to acknowledge how environmental knowledge is gained and spread – and the important and positive role that place can play in this process. In exploring 'place based environmentalism', it is necessary to keep in mind the evolving nature of environmental awareness, which may well require an appreciation of wilderness areas and the protection of specific places (such as the campus) before progressing to include broadscale environmental issues such as air pollution or climate change.

In the final part of this thesis, I critique conventional academic assessments of NGO work. Whilst much literature continues to call on NGOs to play a role of opposition to governments – and a role as bringers of new development models – I argue that an ability to insert their work into extant political and societal processes may ultimately prove to be a far more radical path to choose. I outline how ENGOs involved in the environmental education of young people in China are not only avoiding confrontation with the government but employing government rhetoric and strategies for their own cause. Their largely non-confrontational political stance has implications not only for their current strategies, but will ultimately also affect their future trajectory by raising a next generation of green activists who learn to work with – rather than against – the political tide. By incorporating NGO action into mainstream societal culture, they are negating the traditional NGO role as an agent of political change that is 'born to be wild' (Bryant, 2009). Paradoxically, this apolitical campaigning may be the

most effective way in which to push environmental protection onto the political agenda: by making environmental protection 'mainstream'.

The students' and non-governmental organisations' focus on non-confrontational, embedded activism is likely to strengthen rather than lose its appeal as President Xi continues his crusade against 'Western thought' and foreign-funded NGOs. Like their student counterparts, ENGO leaders consider government surveillance to be something that they ought to 'manage' rather than revolt against. However, the new law will make even entirely uncontroversial campaigning increasingly difficult. Isabel Hilton, the editor of a leading online newspaper on China's environment, suggested in a recent statement: 'Those that are active in policy, however, even where that policy is not directly concerned with such issues as rule of law or human rights, risk finding themselves in a cold climate indeed' (Chinafile.com, 2015). The new regulations also affect whether or not – and, if so, how many – volunteers will be allowed to work for NGOs, making it doubly difficult for students who are passionate about NGO causes to 'do their bit'.

Conclusions drawn from this thesis indicate a need for the analysis of student groups and ENGO engagement in other parts of China. Since student environmentalism in Beijing is intimately connected with the campus and with the city around them, SEA activity is likely to be concerned with different environmental issues - and possibly subject to less or different Party monitoring - in other parts of the country. This dissertation is entitled 'student environmentalism in Beijing' precisely because of this obvious limitation to my research. The same applies to research on ENGOs. Cooper (2006), in her work on Southern ENGOs, notes that ENGO staff there see their engagement as a gateway to political change; a sentiment that, based on findings from this research, does not seem to be shared with their northern counterparts. Going further, this dissertation could thus usefully be followed up with a

comparison to other cities, particularly those in the southern parts of China, which differ markedly in their socio-political as well as economic make-up. Given the centrality of the campus to much of SEA campaigning, tracing how these young people's environmental norms and values develop after graduation would also provide critical insights into the nature of student environmentalism and its effect on students' life trajectories. I also believe that it would have been extremely interesting to spend more time researching the Communist Youth League and attending some of their events, but I was held back in this regard by my worries of receiving too much attention. Research on the Communist Youth League is especially topical now that the government is, once again, stepping up its efforts to rid China's universities of 'Western thought'.

Researching Chinese students' experiences of university also challenges prevailing generalisations about this generation of Chinese youngsters in modern Chinese studies. The example of youth environmentalism serves to both criticise prevailing notions of the detached 'me-generation' and to show how youth are subject to pressures from university, their parents and their peers, which negates literature about their 'spoiled', 'materialistic' and 'egotistical' only-children nature. Students' ideas of the future are shaped by their experience of university and rarely reflect the neoliberal subject, void of values beyond materialism, with which this generation is often associated. Cockain (2012) and Szablewicz (2014) have already called for more nuanced research on this generation of Chinese youth, and this research confirms their suggestions that any broad - and largely negative - depictions serve to hide more than they expose about the potential inherent in this generation.

Huang's (2015) analysis of the coming of age of the 1980s and 1990s generation of young people highlights some of the contradictions inherent in these generational cohorts' political and social make-up. He suggests, however, that their impact on the Chinese state will only

become truly visible in another decade when they have risen to higher positions in the nation's economic and political institutions (Huang, 2015). Based on the findings of this dissertation, the growing environmental awareness among young people and their increasing inclination to 'do their bit for society' (whether for personal or career reasons) will play a significant part in the norms and values shaping their future roles as employees, leaders, NGO staff, teachers, bureaucrats, cadres and parents. Yet, as my analysis has shown, the manner of their contribution remains open to debate as the diversity of their backgrounds and motivations make generalisations difficult. These students are united in their interest in environmental activism and an aversion to chaos. Activist groups are fragmented, however, in levels of politicisation and political belief systems. They are fragmented, also, in their perceptions of state surveillance but, again, ultimately united in an aversion to chaos. The fact that these activist groups are so fragmented also makes the likelihood of contentious politics even less probable, since a political union among activists is highly unlikely. Students' environmental 'fragmented activism' in China continues to be very much 'in the making', as it is not based on a homogenous value set and is shaped not only by political norms or a love for nature, but also state surveillance, economic imperatives and highly diverse understandings of the role and impact which young people's politics can play in a repressive state.

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