



Chinese Women at the Forefront of Environmental Activism:

Wang Yongchen, Liao Xiaoyi and Tian Guirong

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Abstract: All around the world, women have been at the forefront of environmental activism. In the Western world, very little is known about China's environmental movement and its champions. This paper aims to bridge this gap. It does so by tracing the path to activism of three female figures: Wang Yongchen, Liao Xiaoyi and Tian Guirong. For each of the three, I first introduce the main environmental campaigns and I then sketch out a profile of the activist, shedding light on their personal motivations, the rhetorical strategies they employ to spur collective action, and their vision for a greener China. The paper has a twofold result: it not only provides the reader with the elements to understand the country's struggle for sustainability, it also sheds lights on the different manifestations of environmental activism "made in China". Findings draw mainly from the analysis of secondary sources (books, academic papers, newspaper articles) and to a lesser extent, from first hand interviews carried out by the author between July and December 2013.

Introduction

In recent contemporary history, remarkable women, of many geographical regions and of various ethnic, economic, and socio-cultural backgrounds, have played a crucial role in helping to ensure a healthier planet for future generations. In academic scholarship, women have often developed new paradigms within the natural sciences, providing a new perspective into the male-dominated debate on science and technology. An emblematic example is the one of US biologist Rachel Carson (1907 - 1964), who succeeded in bridging the gap between academia and the general public, making environmental issues a common concern of millions of people. Her bestselling book "Silent Spring" (1962) denounced the destruction of wildlife and the catastrophic health consequences caused by the use of pesticides in agriculture. Carson's work not only inspired the nascent environmental movement, but also pushed for a reversal of the US national pesticide policy, leading to a national ban on DDT and to the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Griswold 2012).

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International renowned activist and scholar Wangari Maathai (1940 – 2011) in 1970s' Kenya founded the Green Belt Movement, an environmental NGO that combines natural resources preservation with women's empowerment. Her extraordinary lifelong efforts in the fight for sustainability, democratic values and peace, made her the first African woman to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 (Maathai 2003).

Bertha Caceres (1971-2016), Honduran environmental activist and Lenca indigenous leader, put her life on the line and persevered against daunting odds to defend the Gualcarque River from exploitation by multinational corporations, until she was assassinated in her home by armed intruders in March 2016 (Lakhani 2016). Women have also been heavily represented in environmental justice movements, seeking social justice to preserve their health and the health of their families. One example is the environmental justice movement in the early 1990s in Central Appalachian (USA), where women's identity as mothers played a crucial role in spurring their civic activism to protect their relatives from toxins, flooding, and air pollution originating from coal mining and coal processing (Bell and Braun 2010).

In China, many women have been active supporters of the first environmental battles fought at the beginning of the 90s' (Economy 2010), yet their names have seldom made international headlines. In general, in the Western world, very little is known about China's civic activism for sustainability. Apart from disruptive forms of citizen mobilization, such as environmental mass demonstrations (*huanjing chuntixing shijian*), which often feature in foreign media outlets (Hoffman and Sullivan 2015), more moderate means of contention often go unreported. This is due perhaps to the misguided belief that societal actors cannot play an influential role in an authoritarian country, where freedom of organization, expression and press, are subject to changing degrees of openness (Ho 2007b). On the contrary, China has witnessed a flourishing of environmental NGOs (hereby referred to as ENGOs) in the last few decades. According to recent estimates, in 2008 China had approximately 212,000 civil organizations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, of which 5,330 focusing on ecology and environment (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2008).

ENGOs engage in several activities: they lead awareness-raising campaigns for sustainable lifestyles, implement climate change mitigation projects at the community level, provide consultancy in governmental law-making processes and forge partnerships with business enterprises to encourage investments in low carbon technology development and application. ENGOs are also very active in international negotiations on climate change, lobbying for China to play a strong leadership role in the global fight for emissions reduction (Moriggi 2016). In a way, their contribution in advancing better environmental governance in China is increasingly recognized at the institutional level (Heberer 2012).

It has taken the remarkable efforts of several people for ENGOs to gain room for maneuver and credibility at the local and national level. This paper will focus on the stories of three of China's female environmental pioneers: Wang Yongchen, Liao Xiaoyi and Tian Guirong, who fought their first battles at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Through the analysis of the evolution of their civic engagement, the paper provides an account of the different manifestations of female

environmental activism in China in its early stages. Originally a journalist, an academic scholar and a rural retailer respectively, Wang, Liao and Tian exemplify different ways of becoming activists and doing activism in China. At the same time, one similarity connects them all: being born at the beginning of the 1950s, all three were able to witness first-hand the consequences of the “Reform and Opening” program in 1978 that through the introduction of market principles, marked the start of the country’s economic miracle, at the cost of natural resources degradation (Economy 2010).

The remaining part of the essay will be structured as follows. For each of the three women, I will first introduce the main environmental campaigns and I will then sketch out a profile of the activist, shedding light on their personal motivations, the rhetorical strategies they employ to spur collective action, and their vision for a greener China. The final part of the paper will briefly discuss the relevance of their experiences for the current generation of China’s female environmental activists, while drawing a few conclusive remarks to inform future research in this field.

The facts exposed draw mainly from the analysis of secondary sources (books, academic articles, newspaper articles) and to a lesser extent, from first hand interviews carried out by the author between July and December 2013.

Wang Yongchen (1954 -): Main campaigns

For decades, all over the world, dam construction has ignited civil opposition and spurred otherwise dormant environmental activism. In China, battling against dams, thus engaging in the energy policy debate at a national level, has produced a transformation of the environmental movement. The first environmental campaigns had mainly focused on wildlife protection, featuring courageous conservationists such as Gisang Sonam Dorje and Zhaba Dorje in the fight for the survival of endangered species such as the snub-nosed monkey and the Tibetan antelope (Geall 2013). Later on, it was the construction of contested dams that allowed Chinese activists to learn valuable lessons about lobbying and mobilization, getting their hands dirty in the realms of human rights and government accountability (Geall 2013).

Hydropower has always been a particularly “emotive topic” in China (Geall 2013, p. 54), especially as a legacy of the controversial Three Gorges Dam, the largest hydroelectric scheme on the planet and strongly opposed by many environmentalists. Dai Qing, probably history’s most famous female Chinese environmental activist, became notorious because of her book “Yangtze! Yangtze!”. Published in 1989, it was based on first-hand interviews of people who opposed the project. Tens of thousands of dam projects were launched during the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s by Mao Zedong. In the past few decades these dams have been depicted as a clean alternative to fossil fuels, on which China is still highly dependent (Geall 2013). In 2000, the country had 45,000 dams – half of the world’s total. Dam construction yields a number of disastrous consequences for some of the most beautiful and ecologically sensitive landscapes in China. They may disrupt river streams, destroy fluvial ecosystems, lead to the displacement and re-allocation of thousands of people and are often followed by energy-intensive and dirty industries.

Recent reports suggest that 16 million people have been relocated in the past half century because of large-scale hydroelectric projects (Geall 2013).

The battle against the construction of a dam represented a turning point in the life and career of Wang Yongchen, the first of the environmental heroines depicted in this paper. At the time, Yongchen was journalist at China National Radio and founder of Green Earth Volunteers (GEV – in Chinese *Lv jia yuan zhiyuanzhi*), a Beijing-based NGO established in 1996. The Nu River dam project catalyzed the opposition of several environmental activists: along with Wang, Mr. Yu Xiaogang - head of Green Watershed, an NGO located in Kunming (provincial capital of Yunnan) mobilized local and national forces.

At the beginning of the campaign, the Nu River, literally meaning “angry river” for its tumultuous waters, was one the last pristine rivers in Asia. Its upper reaches flow through a canyon region of outstanding beauty and biodiversity value, worthy of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Award, received in 2003 (Mertha 2008). The plan envisioned the construction of a string of 13 hydroelectric dams, expected to generate revenue of 34 billion yuan (\$5.4 billion) per year (Geall 2013).

Wang had no previous knowledge of dam opposition in China. In 2001 though, during a visit to Thailand, she experienced the vivid resistance of Thai villagers against a local project, an episode that influenced her strongly and led her to build a civil society alliance against the Nu River project in 2003. Only 3 months after the State Council approval of the scheme, sixty-two organizations and individuals had signed a petition to express their discontent about the dam (Mertha 2008). In April 2004, premier Wen Jiabao declared that the Nu River dam project was to be suspended: “Given the high level of social and environmental concerns over the large scale hydro project, further careful research is required in order to reach a scientific decision” (Meng 2011). The news of the personal intervention of one of China’s top leaders was welcomed with great surprise, signaling a new interest in the country’s environmental issues on the part of the policy-makers. Most significantly, the suspension¹ of the project represented a memorable victory for the environmental movement, a result that would have been unimaginable in the past (Yardley 2004).

It is interesting to retrace how that victory was made possible. As it is often true for many environmental campaigns in China, opposition did not only mount over the span of several months, but also originated in different sectors of the country’s social and political system. While we are often led to believe that China’s state apparatus is a monolithic entity, the opposite is true: it is its level of fragmentation that often allows activists’ instances to find their ways within the cracks of the system, and exploit them to their benefit (Mertha 2008). In the case of the Nu River dam, opposition had begun in August 2003 by a state official named Mou Guangfeng, the head of the supervision department of SEPA (State Environmental Protection Administration, now the MEP – Ministry of Environmental Protection). During a review meeting of the plan of the Nu River dam, Mr. Mu came to doubt the feasibility of the project. He held the belief that it had never gone through legal environmental

¹ Recent news report that, despite the initial halt in 2004, the Nu River dam project has begun construction (Ramzy 2013).

procedures, including an environmental impact assessment (EIA)². Unable to find support within SEPA nor within NDRC (the National Development and Reform Commission – China’s macroeconomic ministry), Mr. Mou decided to reach out to his friend Wang Yongchen, sharing his concerns regarding the dam construction. Soon afterwards, Yongchen and dozens of journalists she had rallied, attended a scientific appraisal meeting concerning the Nu River dam, and for the first time, openly criticized the plan. This first public action was followed by another in October 2003, during a meeting of the China Environmental Culture Promotion Association. There, Yongchen, armed only with paper and pencil, collected sixty-two signatures from scientists, artists, media representatives and activists to voice opposition to the plan (Geall 2013).

Yet, stirring concern at the national level was not enough for the skilled activist and journalist. Mobilizing her cross-national networks, Wang was able to secure support at the international level as well; in November 2003, at the World Rivers and People Against Dams held in Thailand, more than sixty nations joined a petition to save the Nu River, later filed with UNESCO. The UN agency responded with a letter titled “Concerns about the Nu River”, once again putting the project in the spotlight. But Wang Yongchen had not used her ammunitions to the fullest yet. Using her clout in the media, in February 2004, she was able to organize a nine-day study trip to the Nu River, to let Beijing and Yunnan-based journalists report about the biodiversity and cultural treasures of the region (Geall 2013).

It is worth noting that, at that point, concerns over the project had spread over to other sectors of society, not only in media and activism realms. In January 2004, Li Xiaoxi, a professor of the Air Force Command College and deputy of Beijing’s Haidian district People’s Congress, had written a letter to premier Wen Jiabao, expressing his opposition to the dam and pointing at the high level of public attention the issue had reached. Once again, an influential figure with a personal connection to the establishment, had reminded policy-makers of the risks implicit in carrying through with a controversial project that had made both national and international headlines (Geall 2013).

It thus seems clear how several elements contributed to the success of the campaign against the Nu River dam. Yet, the determination and commitment of Wang Yongchen proved a crucial ingredient to this success. Her efforts to protect the river gained her the award of World Environment Champion of 2004, along with the recognition as one of the most influential environmental figures in China. Yongchen was able to resort skillfully to her informal *guanxi* (“connections”)³ networks in the state’s bureaucracy, among academia, and in the media sector (Yang and Calhoun 2007).

² Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a process undertaken to evaluate the environmental impacts of a proposed project, plan or activity (Brombal et al 2017).

³ Guanxi are a well-known dynamic of personal connection typical of Chinese society. Through their guanxi, NGOs may be able to achieve the legitimacy and political influence necessary to have a real impact on the ground (Ho 2007a).

Wang Yongchen: Portrait of an activist

Wang Yongchen's success should not be ascribed to her strategic abilities and personal and professional connections only. She is also a woman of great passions and ideals. According to journalist Katy Yan, Wang is also known as "environmental poet" for her lifetime efforts "making poetry out of the places she visits with her camera, pen and recorder" (Yan 2011). Her genuine yet forward-looking love and respect for nature are evident in a series of articles she wrote for the environmental news outlet "China Dialogue". In 2007, inspired by two unrelated events both resulting from people's disregard of the environment in the name of economic development and human progress, she twice called to 'live in harmony with nature'. Her article titled "What if nature could speak?" recounts the memory of several trips she made to some of China's most beautiful natural spots, once untouched by tourism, and now overwhelmed by human's presence causing noise, soil and water pollution. In an almost desperate appeal to spur people's conscience at the eve of Chinese New Year, Yongchen's article concludes with the following sentence:

As people get richer they increasingly use them [holidays] to travel the country. And as they go out to enjoy nature, I would like them to remember: don't base your pleasure on nature's suffering. If you want to live in harmony with nature, you have to try to listen to what it is saying (Wang 2007a).

A month earlier, she had written a long article investigating the fate of the *baiji*, one of the world's four species of freshwater dolphins, now almost certainly completely extinct. Wang's reasoning draws from Chinese' history and culture as well as from recent scientific findings. The article recounts the presence of the *baiji* in popular culture for millennia: a local species of the Yangtze River for around 25 million years, the dolphin had been named "Goddess of the Yangtze" in a Chinese dictionary dating back to 200 B.C. Recent expeditions led by the Chinese Academy of Sciences had found no trace of the dolphin in the river, pre-announcing the extinction of the first cetacean mammal in history, due to human-driven ecological destruction. The Yangtze River Delta is one of the most densely populated and heavily industrialized areas in China. Yongchen's article was again a rational yet fervent call to people's conscience, aimed at raising awareness and social responsibility to save the *baiji* and the environment (Wang 2007b). Through tree-adoption and bird watching activities, Wang's 1996 founded NGO, Green Earth Volunteers, focused on teaching people, students especially, about their natural heritage, from the very beginning (Ramzy 2008).

However Wang's battles have not been driven by a faith in uncompromising conservationism. Devoted to the protection of animal and plant species and their habitat, she is also greatly aware of the fact that environmental degradation will lead to humans' self-destruction. In an interview published by "International Rivers" in 2011, Wang Yongchen made this clear stating that "A deteriorating environment makes economic development a 'mission impossible'. It is just like when people sacrifice health to make money and then have to spend that money to recover their health" (Yan 2011).

Most significantly, her long-lasting mission has been grounded in the belief of the importance of transparency and public participation in environmental matters. In

a country governed by an authoritarian party, with limited freedom of expression granted to its 1.3 billion people, this is no easy endeavor. In an article written for “China Dialogue” in 2006, Yongchen reported her fourth and latest visit to the Nu valley, where she interviewed 100 households on the construction of the dam. Despite an initial halt to the development, explorations at the proposed dam sites had recently started. The activist engaged with local people to understand their awareness of the plans and knowledge about compensation terms, to find out about their participation in possible consultation meetings, and to investigate their opinions regarding the alleged beneficial impacts of the dam. The picture she put together denounced the lack of information provided to the communities affected by the plan, and the lack of inclusiveness granted during the exploration phase. Yongchen lamented: “Why hasn’t the project authority conducted any research into the impacts of building the dams on the 50,000 people who would be moved, and on their culture, traditions and futures lives?” The article ends with a gloomy consideration regarding the then recent publication of the “Provisional Guidelines on public participation in environmental impact assessment”, issued by SEPA in February 2006. The document, the first of this kind ever published by a ministry of the State Council, recognized the legitimacy of the public’s right to participate in environmental protection. Yet, as testified by Wang’s reportage in the Nu Valley, the “Guidelines” were far from representing a powerful tool in the hands of the public⁴ (Wang 2006). In an effort to push for better environmental and public-disclosure laws in China, Yongchen has brought her concerns into mainstream media, most recently with programs such as “Journalists Saloon”, which provides an open platform to raise awareness and debate among environmental reporters (Yang and Calhoun 2007). Her earliest programs – “Save the maples in Xiangshan” and “Clean lake Kunming” – were produced back in 1988, making her a media pioneer in the field of environmental protection (World’s People Blog 2008). Wang Yongchen’s opposition to the dam had also exposed her to risks caused by ecological disruption particularly affecting women. In an interview to the World Rivers Review released in 2011, Yongchen stressed how large dam projects led to people’s loss of land, cultural traditions and livelihoods, particularly for those belonging to ethnic minorities. The consequences of such losses have to be burdened by women mostly, as men are often resorting to out-migration, leaving their female partners in the countryside to take care of what’s left behind, in terms of both productive activities, and family members. Wang Yongchen’s courageous and tenacious efforts to save the environment were not only praised after the Nu River dam development project came to a halt in 2004. She has received several awards over the years including the Globe Award, China’s top environmental prize (Economy 2005). Her experience and popularity has made her a powerful and influential figure in China and abroad.

⁴ Since 2006, the Chinese government has made several efforts to increase the role of public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Brombal et al 2017).

Liao Xiaoyi (1954-): Main campaigns

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake of 7.9 magnitude struck the south-western province of Sichuan, leaving more than 74,000 dead, 247,000 injured and 5 million homeless. It was China's deadliest earthquake in more than 30 years, a disaster that incited a huge response by both governmental and non-governmental forces alike (The Economist 2008). A tremendous surge of support came from volunteers, civic associations, enterprises, and media outlets across the country. Most significantly, according to several commentators, the Sichuan earthquake represented a "watershed event for China's associational sphere" (Shawn and Deng 2011; Jiang 2009). Indeed, as it is often the case in times of calamities and natural disasters, the earthquake provided a "window of opportunity"⁵ for China's civil society organizations to participate, network, and display their worth to the public. It prompted them to mobilize networks within the government, but also with other national and international NGOs and with the media. In the long run, it also stimulated a debate that led to the promulgation of a new "Charity Law", easing the restrictive fundraising and policy environment that has long limited NGO's work in China (Shawn and Deng 2011).

Among the many organizations involved in rescuing and reconstruction efforts was Global Village of Beijing Environmental Education Center (*Beijing diqiu cun huanjing jiaoyu zhongxin* – shortly known as Global Village of Beijing (GVB)), founded and led by Liao Xiaoyi (also known as Sheri Liao), a former professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The earthquake aftermath provided an unprecedented opportunity for Prof. Liao to test a new sustainable living approach – the so-called LOHO Homeland, literally meaning "Happiness and harmony" Homeland. Teaming up with the local government of Daping village, in Tongji county, GVB built "LOHO homes" – farmhouses made of bamboo plywood and folder polystyrene board – and several facilities for waste recycling and biomass production, thus creating a new low-carbon village (Xinhua net 2009; Interview #131212). In helping recovering the local economy after the earthquake, the NGO also provided support to develop eco-agriculture, eco-tourism and creative crafts, all of which were achieved in consultation with the local communities (Xinhua net 2009; Interview #131212). Funds were provided by the Chinese Red Cross and by the Narada Foundation, both heavily involved in the post-earthquake reconstruction (Zhou 2010).

The model implemented in Daping received widespread attention and admiration: upon returning to her hometown, Liao Xiaoyi was asked by local officials to replicate the LOHO experiment in Wuxi county, close to Chongqing city (Liao 2015). As explained by Prof. Liao herself, the LOHO blueprint is not only a philosophy but also a cluster of policies including governance, economy, housing, etiquette and health regimen. It does not only aim at promoting environmental friendly agriculture, but also health an elderly care systems, and creative handicrafts, to create what Liao Xiaoyi defined herself as "a new rural environmental civilization" and "a calling

⁵ Here understood as in "social movement theory", as circumstances that allow civil society actors to influence the policy process. For more on this, see Della Porta and Diani (1999).

from the earth's community of live" to "foster local democracy and moral revival" (Liao 2015, p. 63).

Year 2008 represented a turning point in Xiaoyi's career not only because of the Sichuan reconstruction, but also for another important reason. Long known as a successful environmental activist, Prof. Liao was appointed environmental advisor on the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games 2008 (BOCOG) in 2006 (China Daily 2006). Her work as consultant included developing a mission statement and action for a Green Olympic eco-tour, a significant step towards adopting the International Ecotourism Standard in China (China.org 2006). In preparation for the games, BOCOG and Beijing Municipal Government launched the "Green Olympics" concept, aiming at promoting the environmental sustainability of the Olympics. This was extremely important as it brought to the fore the debate over air and water pollution, raising public awareness on these issues and on the possible solutions (UNEP 2009).

It also proved a great opportunity for Liao Xiaoyi to push forward a number of green campaigns for which she had long advocated, such as the odd-even vehicle ban, the AC temperature standards in public buildings and the waste sorting pilot communities (Zhou 2010). Indeed, GVB had already launched the "We Promise – 26 Degrees Air conditioning Energy Conservation Campaign", in 2004 and 2005, to encourage energy saving by promoting sensible use of air conditioning. Back in early 1999, GVB had worked with the Xuanwu District government along with several property management firms to develop the first pilot Green Community project in China. Best practices collected during the experience were later published in the manual "Green Community Guidelines" (Interview #131212). In 2006, GVB received the "Annual China Best NGO", after ten years of strenuous efforts in a variety of different fields: solid waste separation and recycling, energy conservation, chemical safety and health, ecological protection and green living practices. In 2001, it had already become the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) China civil contact, and in 2002, it participated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development (also known as Earth Summit), which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa⁶

As founder and leader of GVB, Liao Xiaoyi was featured as "Hero of the Environment" in the US magazine "Time" in 2009 (Jiang 2009) and received many national and international awards. Among them, the prestigious Sophie Prize in 2000, which was later awarded to Wangari Maathai, and the 2001 Banksia Sustainability Award from Australia - a prize that had been earlier given to Rachel Carson. On the national level, different ministries appointed her several times appointed at ecological or charity person of the year (Liao n.d.).

Liao Xiaoyi: Portrait of an activist

The ingredients of a successful career in environmental activism lie in the skillful approach fostered by Liao Xiaoyi, combining China's ancient traditional wisdom

⁶ See: GVB activities at <http://www.gvbchina.org.cn/#>

with modern ecological solutions. This convincing cocktail has matured over time, thanks to her experiences in China and abroad. As a researcher of philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, she came across the idea of adaptation to nature, an innovative concept after decades of Mao Zedong's rule, when the dominant belief had been to conquer nature to realize human's needs (Jiang 2009; Shapiro 2001). It was then that she started to gain interest in environmental issues, and got acquainted with Rachel Carson's masterpiece, "Silent Spring".

In 1993 she left China to join her husband who was pursuing a doctorate degree in the United States, where she then became a visiting scholar at North Carolina State University. During her time in the U.S., she shot a documentary called "A Daughter of the Earth", which allowed her a close contact with many American environmental NGOs. This experience proved extremely eye-opening for Sheri Liao: having these organizations play such a big role in the environmental protection movement would have been unthinkable for her earlier on. It had now become her mission to go back to China and create a similar model of civic engagement (Zhou 2010). In 1996 she founded Global Village of Beijing (GVB), with epidemiologist Li Hao (Sheng 2015). Their first endeavors focused on the production of television documentaries, such as "Heaven Knows", displaying ecologically friendly cultures (China.org 2006). As it had been for Wang Yongchen, the media also proved an extremely important ally in Prof. Liao's "green battles". Journalist Zhou Yiyan (2010) uses the term "philanthropreneur" to describe Liao Xiaoyi's attitude as both philanthropist and entrepreneur. In a way, it could also be seen as the combination of "philosopher" and "entrepreneur".

A passionate lecture titled "This endangered planet: A Chinese view" and given by Liao Xiaoyi to the World Affairs Council in Oregon, U.S. in the early 2000s, offers a precious first-hand account of the core messages of her thinking and practice: firstly and most importantly, the idea of harmony emphasized by Confucian philosophy that preaches a balance between the body and the mind, the individual and society, and people and planet. While recognizing the importance of science and democracy, she pointed at harmony as the crucial individual and societal value needed to advance sustainability, and defined Chinese traditional culture as the most "cost-effective tool" to this aim (Liao n.d.). This is no banal statement.

The Chinese government has in recent years undergone a revitalization of Confucian principles pursuant to the realization of the "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), a central plan within the "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming*), envisioned by the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration (2003-2013) (Zhang and Barr 2013). Moreover, China boasts an ancient tradition in the arts, medicine and philosophy, a heritage often upheld by its citizen to express national pride and identity (The Economist 2011). Thus Sheri's quest to re-discover China's traditional culture and wisdom perfectly aligns with the national development agenda and with these Chinese values.

Liao Xiaoyi's second idea introduced during her talk in Oregon is a strong attack to the way sustainability had been conceived (and still is) by international players. Commenting on her recent participation in the OECD annual meeting, she lamented that the main discourses still revolved around the idea of "growth", as clearly exemplified by the word "sustainable development". Xiaoyi suggested to profoundly

question humanity over the purpose of development and start thinking instead in terms of “sustainable living” and “green lifestyles”. She claimed that sustainable development had been used as a marketing tool, as a token void of any real transformative meaning. Living sustainably and embracing a green lifestyle instead means for each and everybody to concretely change consumption and production patterns, something best achieved through the LOHO model (Liao n.d.). Such an outspoken position on a rather delicate matter, metaphorically pointing the finger to powerful actors all over the worlds, speaks to Liao’s bold and yet conscious activism.

The third powerful message conveyed at the World Affairs Council centered on the need to recognize the Earth as the same small village, equally shared by China, the U.S. and the rest of the world. Liao Xiaoyi invited the audience to conceive of China’s environmental problems as its own problems, something it could not just dismiss as easily as it is often done on the basis of national political boundaries. Such a call testifies to not only the progressive thinking embraced by the activist, but also her capability to use international ties to the most effective aims.

Instead of invoking the principle of “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities” (CBDR), often reaffirmed by Chinese leaders (People’s Daily 2015), Liao invited people to see environmental protection as everybody’s mission (Liao n.d.). Significantly, during her speech, Prof. Liao recalled the several circumstances when she was inspired by Rachel Carson’s work in particular and by American NGOs in general. Her time in the U.S. had proved crucial in her experience as an activist. Carson’s main teaching, Sheri affirmed, was that any individual could make a difference (Liao n.d.).

Finally, responding to the audience’s comments on the special relationship between state and civil society in China, Liao made an important political statement on the nature and role of Chinese NGOs. In her view, as it is true for many environmental activists in China (Interviews #131204, #131212, #131220, #130719, #130702, #130703), the partnership between NGOs, government, and private companies is crucial for the country’s sustainability. The balance of ying and yang, of different forces complementing each other, is the real secret conducive to effective influence. Once again, this story teaches us that the special recipe of Chinese environmentalism is not to be undermined, but rather understood and possibly supported, for its capability to effectively bring about change despite the institutional restrictions it faces (Liao n.d.). As put by Zhang and Barr, “it is somewhat misguided to dismiss the impact of green activism in China on the basis of government intolerance and restrictions. In fact, from the perspective of Chinese grassroots, even within the system there is still much that is worth doing” (2013, p. 62-63).

Tian Guirong (1951-): Main campaigns

Soil pollution has become a priority in China’s environmental protection agenda over the past ten years. The country’s authorities could no longer afford to leave the situation unmanaged, due to the escalating rate of diseases associated with heavy metals contamination. In Spring 2014, China publicly disclosed the results of the first National Soil Pollution Survey, revealing that the soil quality of 19.4% of arable land and 36.3% of industrial sites did not meet national environmental quality

standards (Brombal et al. 2015). Main contaminants included heavy metals, such as cadmium, arsenic, lead and nickel. The survey had been carried out between 2006 and 2010, but the data were kept a “state secret” until 2014, on grounds that its release would have put at risk the country’s internal stability and international image at risk (CECC 2013). Illegal discharge of pollutants by uncompliant factories had been the rule for a long time, as businesses have found it cheaper to pollute than to pay for wastewater treatment. New fines have only recently been introduced to increase the cost and frequency of environmental regulations and standards violations (Hu 2014). Moreover, the Measures for Information Disclosure were only adopted in 2008 in China, an extremely important instrument that shames polluters publicly, thus adding a reputational and political cost to the economic one (Li 2016).

But while regulation has made significant advancements in a relatively short amount of time, enforcement is still a weak spot in China’s environmental protection management machine. Institutional, political and ideological factors play an important role on the accuracy of China’s environmental monitoring data (Brombal 2017). Moreover, especially at the local level, factories are powerful entities difficult to challenge by environmental protection bureaus (EPBs), whose clout and resources are often too limited to exert any impact. In some instances EPBs are also guilty of so-called “local protectionism” (in Chinese *difang baohu*), covering up misconduct of local enterprises, partly because of the historical legacy of the planned economy, and partly because of companies’ importance for local revenue and job opportunities (Van Rooij 2010).

It is in this complex and articulated picture that the figure of Tian Guirong, the third and last environmental heroine of this paper, comes to light. In 1998, Mrs. Tian, a battery dealer from a small rural village in Hebei province, embarked on a journey in environmental activism upon a trip to Beijing, during which she discovered that a leaking dead battery can pollute up to 600,000 liters of water, and if buried, can sterilize one square meter of farmland (Li 2010). This provided a completely new perspective into her business and led her to a moral awakening: Tian’s mission became to collect used batteries and raise awareness on the fatal consequences of unmanaged battery recycling to soil and water quality (Xu 2006). Once back in Xinxiang, she discovered that used batteries were randomly thrown into the soil close to the Yellow River. She then reached out to an expert in the chemistry department of Henan Normal University, to gain further knowledge of the risks connected to unmanaged disposal of used batteries. From that moment on, she worked tirelessly: she wrote an article in the local newspaper titled “We must not keep abusing the earth”, to announce her intention to collect used batteries and ask support from the local communities. In four years, Guirong collected over 70 tons of used batteries at her own expenses, saving one million square meter of land from being contaminated (Wei n.d.). The number of batteries was so great that she had to store them in her and in her soon-to-be married son’s house for years. Her campaign was welcomed with mixed reactions: most people did not comprehend her commitment, and resorted to either deriding or attacking her, convinced that she was in search of easy fame. The local environmental protection department was also of very little support, until the news of her accomplishments reached the national level, and MEP (then

SEPA) ordered Henan province to build a dedicated depot to store the collected batteries (Wei n.d.).

In 2001 she created a website to disseminate the news about her activities, and a year later she founded the Environmental Protection Volunteers Association of Xinxiang City (*Xinxiang shi huanjing zhiyuanzhe xiehui*). According to several news outlets, this makes her the first Chinese farmer ever in history to initiate a website and a grassroots NGO dedicated to environmental protection (Li 2010; Wei n.d.). In an interview released to the newspaper “Beijing Review”, Tian Guirong explains the complicated process of getting the association registered. Moved by the idea that the organization would have provided her with the strength to carry out her battles, she knocked at every environmental protection department’s door, where she was rejected repeatedly. This came as no surprise, given her background as a farmer, with no personal connections, no knowledge in governmental and administrative affairs and no expertise in environmental protection issues. She then decided to reach out for help elsewhere. She several times traveled to Beijing to meet Mr. Liang Congjie, founder of the NGO Friends of Nature and renowned figure in China’s environmental movement, who gave her useful guidance on how to make the association become reality. Once again, an example of the strong horizontal links between Chinese NGOs, supporting each other in capacity building efforts (Wei n.d.).

After the association was established with the help of a growing number of volunteers, Tian embarked full force in several environmental campaigns, to clean up the sludge-filled rivers and acrid air of Henan province (Zhang 2006). She and her volunteers lead a pollution survey informing farmers across the whole drainage area of the Yellow River, creating an impressive “pollution map” and attempting to raise public awareness at the grassroots level (Li 2010). The campaign, named “Protect the Mother River” granted Guirong a prestigious award at the 2005 Sixth Ford Motor Environmental Conservation Award program (Wang 2007). She was also invited to the Opening Ceremony of the China Environment Culture Festival 2005 and the awards ceremony of the Figures of Green China. Several successful campaigns followed such as “You Make the World Greener”, “Ten Thousand Signatures for Ozonosphere Protection”, and the “Green Tour of environmental protection in Central China” (Xu 2006). The Environmental Protection Volunteers Association of Xinxiang City also participated in several projects linking Beijing-based NGOs to provincial NGOs. The Beijing-based NGOs provided capacity building, training and national credibility, while local NGOs provided the homegrown contacts needed to operate at the grassroots. One example was a four months survey carried out with local environmental authorities and large companies to test their environmental information transparency. The effort engaged well-known organizations such as the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims (CLAPV) and Friends of Nature (FON), and provincial NGOs like the Youth Environment Association of Chongqing (YEA), Hebei Green Friend Association, and the Home of Gansu Green Volunteers (Hu and Shi 2013).

Mrs. Tian’s civic engagement provided her with many opportunities to learn about other experiences related to a green lifestyle. During a 2008 conference she attended at Renmin University (Beijing), she discovered Community Supported

Agriculture (CSA), a fairly new concept in China (Si et al. 2015) referring to a network of individuals who, through a periodic contribution, pledge to support one or more local farms in exchange of local produce, thus sharing the risks and benefits of food production with the growers. Enthusiastic about this alternative model of agriculture, Guirong decided to create an organic farm herself, hosting different species of plants and animals, and welcoming all kinds of people to join farming activities and experience nature differently (Tian 2012).

Tian Guirong: Portrait of an activist

Journalist Xu Lin defines Tian Guirong “farmer environmentalist” to describe the combination of her rural roots and civic activism (Xu 2006). Her case is a beautiful example of how – as put by Evans and Strauss (2000, p. 818) – “activist interest can inspire intellectual endeavor to the benefit of both”. A rural Chinese woman with little education, Tian’s journey started a moral awakening that leads her to abandon her business, and evolved into an individual (and collective) pathway of formation and 360-degrees of personal commitment. In an interview released to China Daily in 2010, Guirong recounted:

I didn’t have much education but I tried to improve my knowledge as much as possible. Luckily, the Xinxiang environmental protection bureau offered a lot of help. I began to borrow books from the bureau, including *Silent Spring*, and I was also the first farmer to ever subscribe to *China Environment News*, an official publication of the State ministry (Li 2010).

In Guirong’s words, admiration for foreign environmental protection champions Rachel Carson and Erin Brokovich inspired her to push further in her civic endeavor. Guirong confessed when the discussion “*Silent Spring*”: “I could not help but cry when I learned the author was fighting breast cancer when she wrote the book. It forced me to ask myself, ‘Why don’t I do something to help save the environment?’” (Li 2010).

Other factors played an important role in shaping Tian’s activism. As was the case for Wang Yongchen and Liao Xiaoyi, Guirong also belongs to a generation of people who witnessed first-hand the impact that massive industrialization had on the country’s environment and public health. In the same interview with China Daily, she explained how the concentration of factories around her village in recent decades had not only disrupted the local biodiversity, decimating the wild bird populations and turning rivers and streams black, but had also caused severe illnesses to the local population, who suffered cancer in great numbers as a result of the area’s contaminated water and soil (Li 2010).

The desire to translate old-time nostalgia into a plan for action prompted Tian Guirong to run for Fanling village local elections in 2005, determined to turn the contaminated village into an ecological sanctuary. Once elected as head of the village committee, Guirong was able to veto polluting projects, clean up waterways, build a tree corridor, and establish a special water supply plan to teach villagers to save water (Li 2010).

From knowing very little about environmental protection issues, year after year Guirong developed into a leader in transformational⁷ sustainability practices. Her thinking goes beyond the mere endorsement of energy saving solutions, or sound waste recycling – measures which are definitely important, but that somehow reproduce the same pattern of development. One such example is her progressive attitude when describing her interest in alternative models of agricultural production. In a self-introduction on the website “South South Forum”, Tian explains how she believes in the need to support organic agriculture, develop green consumption and facilitate the relationship between rural and urban areas. The latter point is particularly important – and innovative - in a country like China, which has recently put urbanization at the core of its development strategy (Tian 2012).

She also describes the importance of allowing people of all ages to be exposed to rural life and farming activities, not only for pedagogical but also for therapeutic reasons (Tian 2012). This resonates with the values upholding the idea of Social Farming (also known as Care Farming), a social innovation practice with no precedent in China, now a growing yet still marginal phenomenon in Europe (Dessein et al. 2013).

Unfortunately, Tian Guirong’s story of civic engagement is not all positive. Her public exposure also caused many problems. Her grassroots activism has forced her to deal with the difficult reality of vested interests and local power dynamics. Fighting for environmental information transparency and disclosure can be a risky business. In an interview released in 2009, Guirong confessed her fears following several threatening calls directed to herself and her collaborators: “I’m scared, I don’t dare sleep at a fixed place. Tonight I’ll be at my sons, tomorrow at my daughters, or I stay at my association” (Terra Daily 2009). Indeed, the inspections carried out by the Environmental Protection Volunteers Association of Xinxiang City led to the closures of more than 100 polluting factories.

Volunteers would take pictures of plants, collect water sewage inflow points, test them and send the results to the local environmental protection bureaus, making her a “common enemy of these enterprises” and their laid-off workers (Li 2010). Such discontent might also have contributed to her defeat in the 2008 local elections, when she ran again in the hope to continue her work as head of the committee of Fanling village. Moreover, as it is often the case for small grassroots organizations, financial constraints are a constant source of worry (Li 2010). In order to sustain her activities, Tian Guirong incurred substantial debts, to the point of confessing to the news outlet Phoenix Reader in 2016, the idea of selling the Olympic torch she had carried during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Da 2016).

Conclusions

This paper has retraced the main juncture points of the struggle for sustainability of three Chinese female environmental activists: Wang Yongchen, Liao Xiaoyi and

⁷ By “transformational sustainability practices”, I refer to practices that deeply question what we value and the way we live, thus compelling us to design conscious alternatives to the mainstream idea of sustainable development. For more on this, see Feola 2015.

Tian Guirong. It has also highlighted their strategies, their motivations, and their values used in their activism. Though maintaining different visions for the future of their country, all three women seem to deeply question the dominant approach to human-nature relations, and they do so through lawful and moderate means of mobilization.

These stories also reveal that one is not born an environmental champion, nor do they always engages in the same battles. Wang's, Liao's, and Tian's experiences epitomize a particular historical phase of China's environmental movement, which has been constantly evolving and adapting to the country's contextual and structural changes.

Against this background, future research on this field should investigate the changes, which have occurred in the environmental associational sphere in China, from the perspective of the current generation of female activists. Below I sketch out two possible lines of inquiry of the issue, with the hope to inspire further investigations on this fascinating yet unexplored topic of research.

In an interview released to "International Rivers" in 2011, Wang Yongchen testified on the importance of women's involvement in China's environmental movement, and of the prevalence of female representatives in the country's green NGOs (Yan 2011). A confirmation of the latter also emerged during fieldwork interviews conducted by the author of this paper with several ENGOs representatives over the past few years (Interviews #131204, #131212, #131220, #130719, #130702). No statistically significant data is available at the moment, but anecdotal evidence suggests that women are heavily represented in China's environmental associational sphere. Moreover, on a superficial analysis, if compared to the first generation of environmental torchbearers, their motivations and style of activism seem to be less charged with idealism and more with pragmatism (Moriggi forthcoming). Future research could aspire to answer the following questions: to what extent is this anecdotal data confirmed at a wider level? What are the socio-cultural reasons behind it? How is it connected to the evolution of environmental activism elsewhere in the world? What are its implications for the future of ENGOs in China?

A second line of investigation could delve deeper into the gendered nature of China's female environmental activism. In March 2015, Chai Jing, a former Chinese state television reporter, released "Under the Dome", a documentary about the doomed reality of air pollution impacts, which attracted 200 million viewers in the span of a few days. Of particular note is the fact that Chai Jing starts the documentary with a personal account: "I'd never felt afraid of pollution before, and never wore a mask no matter where. But when you carry a life in you, what she breathes, eats and drinks are all your responsibility, then you feel the fear" (Tran 2015). Her words resonate with her experience of a mother rather than a journalist, a choice that might have strongly contributed to the popularity of the documentary. However, existing research has failed to investigate the extent to which gendered factors play a role in shaping China's environmentalism. One possible line of inquiry could reveal the impact of gender-specific instances on different areas of concern, such as food safety, water contamination, and air pollution; another one could explore the gender-specific instances of lawful activism *versus* disruptive activism; a further one could

examine the different manifestations of gendered environmental activism, within the country's emerging urban middle-class and its rural society.

Although many questions still remain, it is undeniable that women play an important role in Chinese environmental activism.

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