Being objective with a personal perspective: how environmental journalists at two Chinese newspapers articulate and practice objectivity[1]

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Abstract

This article examines what objectivity means to 15 environmental journalists at two Chinese newspapers and how this value guides their practices. It reveals that although objectivity is central to their journalistic ethos, the participants see it as ethical to organise reports within a framework arising from their personal judgments of news events. The appropriation and particular definition of the American journalistic norm of objectivity increases the participants' political safety and justifies them in playing their perceived role as guardians of society and educators. In so doing, they negotiate with other social actors and consolidate their cultural authority over defining reality.

Objectivity may not work for environmental journalism (Bavadam, 2010). A prevailing academic view sees environmental journalism as being about advocacy (Acharya & Noronha, 2010; Neuzil, 2008; Schwartz, 2006; Wyss, 2008; Schwartz, 2004). Therefore, does objectivity no longer matter to environmental journalists? If this is not the case, what does objectivity truly mean to them? How does committing to the value of objectivity guide environmental journalists' practices?

This study answers these questions through unpacking 15 environmental journalists' claims to objectivity, to determine what this value means to them. It also checks their expressed values against their reports on environmental problems. The true meaning of objectivity, the consistency between their views of their practices and their reports, as well as the underlying reasons, bring a new perspective to understanding the culture of China's environmental journalism. In this case, the participants from two Chinese newspapers manage to integrate their own perspectives of environmental problems into their reports as a result of practicing their version of objectivity. The participants tactically adopt the value of "objectivity", which is at the centre of their journalistic ethos, to justify their practices. In so doing, they can legitimately shoulder social responsibility and educate the public on the one hand and on the other secure their cultural authority in defining reality without inviting political retribution. This case demonstrates that although objectivity is recognized by this group of environmental journalists as a key value of good journalism, their real practices follow a perception of the role of journalism that is socially and historically shaped in the Chinese context; at the same time they have appropriated the American journalistic norm of objectivity by defining it in a particular way. This appropriation reflects the influences of the Communist and Confucian traditions.

What is objectivity?

The American model of professional journalism has long valued the norm of objectivity (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Schudson, 1978; Schudson 1990; Schudson 2001). This classic occupational norm has been developed as part of the professionalisation of journalism (Donsbach, 1995; Schiller, 1979), guiding journalistic practices and maintaining journalistic boundaries and authority (Schudson, 1978; Schudson, 2001; Schudson, 1990). Objectivity requires a separation of facts from opinions in news reports. It believes that the subjective judgment of journalists should be removed. Therefore it is defined as "an ideal counter to the reality of the reporter's own subjectivity" (Schudson, 1990: 268; McQuail, 1994: pp145). Objective journalists are expected to be outsiders who observe and objectify social phenomena rather than enter into a dialogue with the objects they observe (Soffer, 2009).

However, the idea of objectivity is controversial. First, it is by no means a universal value. Social systems and factors, such as political structures, media market conditions, cultural or religious influence, journalism traditions and journalistic professionalization levels, account for the variations in the acceptance and definition of objectivity among different models of journalism (de Burgh 2005; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In addition, objectivity is considered not only as a value but also as a practice or a performance (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010; Boudana, 2011). This view sees objectivity as being multi-dimensional and ongoing, not static and absolute. With these propositions, Carpentier and Trioen (2010)argue there is an inevitable gap between what journalists want to do and what they actually do, while Boudana (2011) suggests that journalists, the objectivity of whose practices is open to evaluation, should do their best to ensure that their statements correspond to reality and take responsibility for their reports. The understanding of objectivity also varies across professions. For example, Post (2015) argues that academics and journalists define objectivity in different ways and their attitudes toward it are related to the subjects they are dealing with.

Second, some critics regard it as unattainable and undesirable to achieve absolute objectivity, because news reports always convey, rather than being free from, meanings and biases (see detailed discussion in Boudana, 2011). Social constructionist scholars such as Tuchman (1978), Shoemaker and Reese (1996) and Cohen and Young (1973) are not fond of the idea of objectivity, as they believe the media construct rather than reflect reality. As various factors including journalists' psychological perceptions, opinions and subjective judgments play their respective roles in influencing journalists' news-making decision processes (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Donsbach, 2004; Schudson, 1991), news products inevitably involve journalists' subjectivity and therefore carry their perspectives.

Scholars tend to see objectivity as a type of strategy. For example, the norm of objectivity is regarded as an efficient occupational and organizational strategy in legitimizing commercialization of media organizations (e.g. Cronin, 1992, Carey, 1969, McNair, 1998; Birkhead, 1982; Høyer & Lauk, 1998). Journalists have strategically adopted the claims of being objective and practicing balanced reporting in their exercise of boundary maintenance (Zelizer, 1993; Carlson, 2007; Lewis, 2012; Lowrey, 2006; Bishop, 1999; Fakazis, 2006; Schudson, 2001). Tuchman's seminal work contends that objectivity is a "strategic ritual' that enables journalists to escape from responsibility for carrying opinions in their reports (Tuchman, 1972). Tuchman, however, does not clarify whose opinions they are. The opinions could be news actors' opinions but also could be journalists' opinions, which result from frame-sending and frame-setting (Bruggemann, 2014). For Gitlin (1980), the

adoption of objectivity in journalism in fact reinforces the dominant hegemony. Objectivity even acts like a discursive strategy that is used by news organizations to establish their organizational images and to control journalists (Boudana, 2011).

Moreover, the validity of objectivity depends on which genres of journalism we are talking about. Objectivity is particularly problematic for environmental reporting for two reasons. The first reason refers to the ambiguity of truth. Guided by the principle of objectivity, journalists search for truth (Broersma, 2010). However, truth in itself is ambiguous in environmental reporting. Many issues, concerns and problems involve scientific questions that are as yet not settled or even subject to broad scientific consensus. Scientific truth changes over time and requires repeated tests and verifications of scientific theories. The issue of climate change, for example, was once characterized by diverse views such as whether it is anthropogenic or not, and even whether or not it is occurring at all; though consensus exists on many points at the present time, there is still scientific uncertainty (Schneider, 2010; Giddens, 2011). Scientific uncertainty makes it difficult for environmental journalists to "seek truth and report it", as there may be several versions of the truth. The best thing environmental journalists are able to do is to cite different viewpoints in order to engage in balanced reporting. This type of 'he said, she said"- or one might say, 'ping pong'- journalism, serves the principle of objectivity but leads to the loss of meaningfulness in environmental reporting (Schwartz, 2006; Bavadam, 2010). Environmental journalism however cherishes such meaningfulness.

The second reason is related to the role of environmental reporting. It has been long debated whether environmental reporting should offer objectivity or advocacy and whether environmental journalists are environmentalists or pro-environmental advocates (LaMay & Dennis, 1991; Wyss, 2008). Some scholars argue that environmental journalism should be practiced in such a way as to trigger changes in environmental policy, raise environmental awareness among the public and promote environmentalism in society (Neuzil, 2008). Therefore, these scholars believe that environmental journalism should consider objectivity less, and instead practice advocacy journalism in order to respond to the increased number of environmental problems in the world (Bavadam, 2010; Dixit, 2010; Frome, 1998; Wyss, 2008; Neuzil, 2008). The idea is that 'ping pong' journalism is only able to present different viewpoints or facts in a dry way and that this makes environmental reporting lose any power to advocate change (Bavadam, 2010; Dixit, 2010).

This view that sees advocacy as central to environmental journalism however raises a question: Does this mark the end of objectivity in environmental reporting? While some scholars argue this is the case in contexts like Brazil (e.g. Dornelles, 2011), other studies however contend that objectivity continues to be an important

journalistic norm for environmental journalism. Greek environmental journalists, for example, have been found claiming to practice diverse journalistic values mixing objectivity and advocacy (Giannoulis, Botetzagias, & Skanavis, 2010). Somewhat older research reveals that in the United States the experience of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) proves the limited but continuing value of objectivity as a journalistic standard (Palen, 1999). Detjen identified the global rise of a "new kind of environmental report" that blends objectivity and education (Detjen, 2002). Hiles and Hinnant have found that experienced American environmental journalists still believe in objectivity but redefine it (Hiles & Hinnant, 2014). These studies however leave two other questions unanswered: if environmental journalists profess objectivity, what does this norm mean? and whether and to what extent their claim to objectivity guides their practices? In addition, the literature has only examined the situation in a limited number of social contexts but has left that in many others unexamined. This article will address these questions by looking into the case of China. In the context of China, no studies have been done on this topic yet.

Journalism in China

Since the media reforms in the 1980s, Chinese journalists have experienced considerable reporting autonomy, though political control over journalism and the media's political institutional function continues (Zhao, 2012). Journalism has gradually separated from the Party system. Financially, the Party-state has stopped funding most news media. A large number of journalists are no longer employed in the quota system (*shiye bianzhi*) (Lin, 2010). The party has lost complete control of the management of news organisations, though media ownership remains untouched (*shiye danwei qiye guangli*) (Zhao, 1998). Premised on these changes, Chinese journalism is gradually demarcating itself from propaganda and journalists from party propagandists. Lin's survey shows Chinese journalism enjoys a higher professional status than in the 1990s, though she has not explained what is meant by professionalism in her article (Lin, 2010). The dominance of the values of Party journalism has been weakened as new journalistic values and standards have emerged. For example, influenced by the classic American professional model that is seen as a paradigm of good journalism, one type of Chinese journalist can be identified as American-style professionals (Hassid, 2011). Journalism education has also started including appreciative acknowledgment of the American journalism model (Yong & Lee, 2009).

Accompanying the proliferation of commercial media outlets is the emergence of diverse genres of journalism, one of which is environmental reporting. Environmental problems have become hot topics for Chinese journalism since the

mid-1990s, when the central government encouraged journalists to reveal and work to prevent human activity that damaged the environment. The launch of the propaganda program called the "China Environment Centennial Journey" in 1993 signaled the government's positive attitude toward environmental reporting. Media brands that were renowned for investigative reporting such as CCTV's *Oriental Horizon* (*dongfang shikong*) and *Focus* (*jiaodian fangtan*), the *Southern Weekend* and the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, the *21st Century Business News (21shiji jingji baodao)*, the *First Financial and Economic News* (*diyi caijing ribao*), the *Beijing Youth (beijing qingnian bao)*, the *Caijing* Magazine and the *New Century* Magazine (*caixin*) are among the most important vehicles covering the environment.

Whether objectivity matters to environmental reporting is an especially difficult question in China because Chinese society does not seem to provide the right soil for nurturing objectivity. First of all, there is no political polarization, which is one of the preconditions for the emergence of objectivity (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The Communist Party has had a monopoly of political power for more than half a century. Chinese journalism has had a clear instrumental function by its very nature (Zhao, 2012). This Communist tradition creates difficulties for Chinese journalism to be politically and ideologically neutral. This is because in this tradition journalists are normally expected to express opinions in favor of the Communist Party and its allies.

In addition, the culture of Chinese journalism is rooted in the legacy of a Confucian intellectual tradition that defines its role in a specific way (Lee, 2005). Through monitoring society and its rulers as well as advocating political ideas, Confucian intellectuals need to shoulder the responsibility of ensuring that society is running healthily and that the rulers are ruling humanely (Tong, 2011). In other words, intellectuals should be guardians of society and educators of the people. This intellectual tradition expects journalists to interpret the meanings of events for ordinary people and to progressively promote political ideas for the good of Chinese society (Lee, 2005). Guided by Confucian philosophy, journalists are superior to and more judicious than the masses, who may not be able to tell right from wrong and true from false and therefore need to be educated. The legacy of the Confucian tradition therefore expects reports to include opinions. The traditional epistemology behind Chinese journalism is thus in conflict with the norm of objectivity that requires reports to be opinion-free.

However, objectivity has found its way into the discourse of Chinese journalism. Chinese journalists began to engage themselves in discussions of objectivity back in the 1930s (Mackinnon, 1997). One prominent example was the launch of the *Dagong Daily (dagong bao)* that took a politically neutral and objective stance in the middle of the 20th Century. This journalistic discourse nevertheless was soon overtaken by

the more prevalent discourse of partisan journalism. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese journalism mainly functioned as the ruling Party's mouthpiece and as part of its information infrastructure and this further added to the absence of a foundation for the journalistic ethos of objectivity. Despite that, the norm of objectivity has re-emerged in the contemporary discourse about Chinese journalism and in the discourse of journalists themselves. In contemporary China, scholars argue that a considerable number of Chinese journalists - especially investigative journalists and those who embrace the liberal journalism model - treat the norm of objectivity as their key journalistic value (Tong, 2007; Hassid, 2011). While journalists' acceptance of objectivity provides some evidence of the influence of American journalistic norms on Chinese journalism, both what objectivity means to Chinese journalists and how this notion guides their practices remain unclear. Very recently, Zhang (2014) examined how 16 Chinese war correspondents who have covered conflicts outside China perceive objectivity and argues that objectivity is used as a "practical ritual" by these journalists to facilitate their work in foreign war zones and even to promote "allegiance and patriotism". This interesting case however is limited by the focus on war correspondents who do their work in foreign territories. Nor did this study touch on whether the journalists actually do their job according to their understanding of objectivity.

Against the backdrop of China, it is particularly uncertain whether environmental journalists are likely to make a claim to objectivity, what this norm means to them and whether and how their claim would guide their practices. This is because, on the one hand, the Confucian and Communist traditions of Chinese journalism might reinforce the importance of opinions in environmental reporting, but, on the other hand, the recent re-emergence of objectivity might leave its imprint on environmental reporting by offsetting the influence of the two traditions.

A note on methodology and data

The empirical materials for the analysis in this article are chiefly drawn from two sets of data: 1) individual in-depth interviews with 20 journalism practitioners (including 15 environmental journalists, two editors, and three members at the management level) at two newspapers during 2011-2013 (of these, 17 were interviewed in July, August and December 2011, 2 in January 2012 and 1 in 2013); and 2) an analysis of 85 in-depth reports on environmental problems produced by the 15 journalists from 2008-2011. The interviews aimed to discover journalists' interpretation of objectivity, their perception of environmental problems and explanations of the patterns in the content of their reports. The articles are analyzed with the purpose of looking for evidence to substantiate or refute what the

journalists have said about their work.

These environmental journalists were from the investigative reporting team of Newspaper A and the Green reporting team of Newspaper B[2] (published by a single press group). Seven of them were from Newspaper A and eight from Newspaper B. They were invited to participate not only because they had published a number of influential environmental reports but also they were accessible at the time when the interviews were conducted. They constitute about two thirds of all the journalists who have consistently covered environmental problems within the two teams in 2011 and are well-known for their environmental reporting[3]. From 2011-2014, several of them won prizes for "the best environmental journalists or reports of the year in China" launched by the *Guardian* and the *China Dialogue*. Most of them were born in the 1980s and grew up in an era that had experienced the opening-up reforms and had seen a high consumption of imported Western cultural products. Nine of these journalists are male and six female. They have all received higher education and can use English fluently in their daily lives and for work. Nineteen interviews were face-to-face interviews, undertaken in public places such as cafes and restaurants, while one was done by telephone Participants decided where the interviews should take place.

There are two reasons for selecting the two newspapers. First, they are financially and politically influential. Both newspapers boasted huge nationwide circulations - 1.86 million (daily) for Newspaper A and 1.7 million (weekly) for Newspaper B in 2013. The two news organizations are two of the most avant-garde newspapers in China, both of which are inclined to be supportive of the values of freedom of speech. Occasionally Western (especially American) journalists and managers are invited to deliver training courses for journalists at these two organizations. For example, as early as in 2006, the Missouri Journalism School provided a five-day training course for hundreds of journalists and managers at the press group including those from the two newspapers. Over the past few years, journalists and editors from both newspapers have openly opposed the interference in the media by the political authorities and have strived for media freedom. Therefore, the journalists interviewed in this study may have been influenced by the in-house journalistic values prevailing at the press group.

Second, the two outlets have given environmental reporting extensive attention and coverage. The investigative reporting team in Newspaper A has a tradition of covering environmental problems[4]. Newspaper B launched its Green reporting team in 2009 with a focus on environment-related topics. Particular newspaper pages are devoted to reports of this kind. Given the distinctiveness of the sample, this study is only a case study and cannot be generalized to represent the whole situation of

journalism or environmental journalism in China.

This qualitative research was carried out in three steps. First, all reports that were available prior to the interviews were read through so that a general sense of the content could be gained. Second, in the interviews, the participants were invited to provide three types of information: their understanding of objectivity, their comments on what an objective report should look like and on their own reports, as well as their perception of environmental problems. The interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed by using a qualitative and interpretive methodology (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Murdock, 1999). This approach stresses sense-making, conceptualization and theme-emerging. Although being qualitative, the analysis and interpretation uses quantitative (rather than numeric) terms such as 'more', 'less', and 'majority' where necessary. The interviews offered some basis for designing the framework used to analyze the 85 reports. In the third step the content of the reports was analyzed to assess whether the journalists' final products presented the features that journalists believe an objective report should have. All participants will be anonymous.

Findings

Objectivity in journalists' own words: balanced reporting with perspectives

There is an apparent and noteworthy paradox in the journalists' own accounts of their objectivity. On the one hand, the participants share a consensus in making a strong claim to objectivity, which means presenting balanced views in reports, but on the other, they admit that their personal judgments of situations are involved and, they believe, should act as a framework to guide their writing.

The participants in general regard objectivity as the basic principle for the practice of professional journalism. They express and share a clear consensus that they should reveal the truth in an objective way, which is what professional journalists should do and what distinguishes professional journalists from non-journalists. Participant 1, for instance, contends that news reports should "*be objective, independent and fair*" (interview July 26th, 2011). Objectivity is thought of as the only effective way to guarantee the truthfulness of reports, though participants also realize that it would be impossible to achieve absolute objectivity. This view is best exemplified in the comments of Participant 2: "*the responsibility of journalists, in my view, mainly refers to reporting the truth (of events): only the most objective truth can endure the test of time and of history and is on a par with absolute truth*" (interview July 21st, 2011).

Environmental events usually involve various news actors who have their

respective interests or different views on relevant issues. The participants agreed that the idea of objectivity is best understood as meaning the need to cite and present balanced information or the viewpoints of multiple news sources. Their reports may include different opinions from news sources but should not present a clear preference for one opinion over another. When asked how to deal with different and even opposing views presented by news actors such as experts, Participant 3 responded: "*in this kind of case, the best thing to do is to objectively record both points of view*" (interview July 26th, 2011). This view suggests that the participant sees objective journalism as "he said, she said" or "ping pong" journalism, that avoids being biased or opinionated in the reports. In addition, they all believe that verifying the information provided by news sources is part of an environmental journalist's job. The presentation of multiple news sources in reports helps to testify to the credibility of news sources through cross-checking their words, which offers the basis for objectivity and truthfulness. This point shows the participants' willingness to exercise epistemic authority in verifying various opinions and information offered by news actors.

However, this does not mean journalists should remove their own judgments about news events from their reports. Instead, almost all participants believe that objectivity means presenting different viewpoints in a balanced way within a particular framework that arises from journalists' judgments. The judicious ability of journalists is seen as an essential part of the profession. For them, their own judgments are needed to make their reports meaningful. This important point can be seen clearly expressed in the remarks of Participant 4: "*it is not enough if we have a 'pure balance'. It is necessary to have the judgment of the authors. Otherwise they - the readers- would get confused and do not understand (the truth), if the reports merely list a number of views made by several people. I think, journalists do not merely need to record different views like recorders, but perhaps need to apply professional judgment to interpret news events in order to give their readers a clear idea about how to understand these events*" (interview July 4th 2011). This comment conveys the importance of opinions in environmental reports as well as a sense of Confucian intellectual discourse that sees journalists as being responsible for educating the readers, who otherwise may not be able to grasp the truth.

That is to say, the participants do not equate "being objective" with the complete detachment of their subjective opinions from the facts in their reports. Instead, journalists need to select perspectives in order to interpret and present reality in an 'objective' report. In the words of Participant 5, this (framework or perspective) is "*a logic that we should adopt to understand news events in a professional way… we construct (a system of logic) to understand the world*"

(interview July 13th, 2011). The participants' interpretation of objectivity suggests a constructionist approach to covering the environment and justifies the prominence of their own opinions in their reports.

What they said versus what they wrote: presenting various views, personal judgments and schemas

In the interviews, the participants explained that an 'objective' report should present different views offered by news actors and that these views need to be organized under a framework coming from journalists' judgments. The content analysis of their reports confirms that their reports reflect these aspects.

The reports indeed cite different and even opposing views from news sources, including elite news sources such as officials and professionals, as well as grass-roots news sources such as environmental victims. Scientific knowledge offered by experts, information or documents provided by organizations as well as by official/academic reports, are also cited in order to support the views presented in these reports. For example, the author of a report on sand storms in Western China believes that citing different views is an effective way to achieve objectivity. Correspondingly, his report offers three views/opinions about the causes of sand storms in the analysis. These three scholarly views disagree with one another. In another report about the environmental risk caused by chemical factories locating upstream of the Three Gorges reservoir, the journalist cites the comments made by the Greenpeace Science Headquarters Laboratory and the Environmental evaluation report to explain the concept of 'MDI' and the dangers 'MDI' causes, because she believes such explanations are authoritative.

Although the reports cite the views of both elite and non-elite news sources, the two groups of news sources appear disproportionately in these reports. The comments by members of elites such as those from representatives of governments and by other journalists were cited much more frequently (nearly four times more) than those by non-elite sources. The references to authoritative news sources - including officials and government departments as well as professionals – appear frequently and account for more than half of all the news sources. Therefore, the reports seem to reflect the dominant interests of elites, as elites are still the "primary definers" of environmental problems. This point also appears to resonate with an existing argument that practicing objectivity may lead to (rather than eliminate) biases in news, as a result of relying on official and elite sources (Bennett, 1983). However, the participants reject this interpretation. According to them, the reason that they include such a high proportion of "authoritative" news sources is because they want to weave a safety net for their reports and avoid negative political consequences. They argue that the elite opinions are counterbalanced by their

strategic organization of the information offered by all the news sources, which ensures the credibility of reports. They believe their reports are guided by their own judgments about what has happened to the environment and why.

A detailed analysis of the reports confirms the participants' explanation, as the interpretation of environmental problems in their reports matches the way their perception of these problems. A common and clear trend across these reports is the presence of interpretations of environmental problems as social problems which are caused by human activity, especially economic activity. Pollution is portrayed as the main cause for environmental problems and the topics of climate change and global warming are excluded from the reports. Linking environmental problems to existing social inequalities, the reports attribute such problems to economic development and to those with higher social status who exploit natural resources in order to increase their personal wealth, and conversely, portray ordinary residents as the victims of environmental problems. In the main, governments, officials, economic elites and organizations as well as the national priority for economic growth are held responsible for the worsening environmental situation in China, while climate change and global warming is seldom mentioned and does not take the blame for environmental problems. This is partly because the local audience is judged as lacking interest in the topics of climate change and global warming. According to the participants, it is domestic issues where the local audience suffers directly which are most central to their interests. In addition, reporting on climate change and global warming is too abstract and lacks dramatic elements that have a strong impact on local audiences. The reports interpret environmental problems as caused by human activity and by the national priority for economic growth. Disadvantaged groups, such as fishermen, workers and farmers, together with some regions and nature generally are viewed as the main (almost only) victims of environmental problems . The universal theme among all these reports is that environmental problems are rooted in China's problematic social and political system. Such prominent meanings about the types, causes and consequences of environmental problems, as constructed in these reports, demonstrate that the reports are far from being neutral and un-opinionated. These meanings however do not come from one or two news actors. Instead they are generated through the overall organization of information, lexical choices and frames in the reports. For example, in the sand storms case illustrated above , by citing three different scientific views in a particular way, the article criticizes the governments for failing to curb sandstorms and suggests they take on an active role in offering an efficient system to effectively mitigate and manage the environmental problem.

This interpretation of environmental problems, their causes and consequences,

is consistent with participants' perception of environmental problems. The majority of participants regarded pollution as the most prominent environmental problem, resulting from a blind rush for economic growth. For instance, when asked what environmental problems he thought existed, Participant 6 said "*the first thing comes to my mind is pollution, like the Zijin Mining Pollution Accident*" (interview July 26th, 2011). The participants believe that pollution can be found everywhere in China, in the air, water, and even in the soil, as Participant 7 commented:

"heavy metal pollution (in soil) is merely one type of pollution…. Pollution also includes air pollution caused by industrial gas emissions, and water pollution. You see, lakes, such as the Tai Lake and those lakes in the South, all suffer from pollution… Rivers in Huabei Plain have almost all stopped flowing as there is no water in these rivers. Besides, industrial enterprises are everywhere in this area. Polluted water emitted by these enterprises seeps underground. One consequence of this is most underground water is undrinkable. The situation in the South is the same." (Interview July 21st, 2011)

In contrast, the topic of "climate change" is missing in participants' perceptions of environmental problems. As far as the few participants who have mentioned it is concerned, they see it as simply a fad, as the Chinese population who are suffering from pollution would have no interest in it. The participants appear not to have recognized the connection between pollution, climate change and global warming. Their perception of the types of environmental problems that exist fit perfectly with the picture their reports present.

Furthermore, the participants in general regard environmental problems as social and even political issues. For example, Participant 8 commented on the occurrence of a mining pollution incident:

"Its occurrence should be attributed to some complicated issues that are most possibly associated with the development of the local economy and the practices of the mining industry. This is beyond being a purely scientific problem; instead, it is a social problem." (Interview July 4th, 2011).

In the eyes of these journalists, the social problems that cause environmental damage can mainly be attributed to the national priority for economic growth, the weak implementation of environmental policies and social inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged individuals, social groups, and geographical regions. When asked about his explanation for the way environmental issues are represented in his reports, for instance, Participant 9 replied in the following words: "*the causal relationship (between pollution and economic development) emerges quite naturally because pollution must have some connection to economic development*" (interview July 26th 2011). Participant 10's comments are also typical of this view: "*guided by*

the national policy of running after economic growth, governments and officials, especially those at local levels, would encourage enterprises to make profits at any costs. There are no regulations or law prohibiting this from happening."(interview July 26th, 2011). Environmental problems are further interpreted by the study participants as a problem with the socio-political system in China and officials at all levels should take responsibility for them. When Participant 11 explained why she thought environmental threats were indeed associated with social problems and politics, she said China does not lack environmental regulations and policies. What China lacks are the healthy and effective implementation of environmental regulations, while the low literacy level and incapacity of environmental victims and ordinary people, who are usually in a disadvantaged position, to protect their own rights (interview April 3rd, 2013).

Another major feature of the participants' perception about environmental problems is the prominent notion of advantaged groups' exploitation of politically and materially disadvantaged people. The following comments made by Participant 12 are representative: "*basically this (the emergence of environmental problems) is about the shameless exploitation by a few economic super-men/women of the life chances and resources of ordinary people, who have no power and chance to choose where to live. This is a problem about humanity rather than a problem about nature*" (Interview July 10th, 2011). This understanding fits the media representation of environmental problems, already discussed, very well. However these comments and understanding are in considerable opposition to economic modernization, which is the top priority of the Chinese government. They thus need to be conveyed tactically and are otherwise likely to invite retribution from the authorities.

Therefore, one can discover a clear resemblance between the schemas in the minds of participants and in the texts, which indicates the transfer of the journalists' opinions into their reports. The fact that it is possible to detect the strong opinions of journalists embodied in their reports indicates that although the participants have claimed they are practicing balanced and objective journalism, their perceptions of environmental problems and the way they frame these problems are reflected in their writing. Their environmental reportage is thus a construction of reality based on the journalists' cognition rather than a mirror-like reflection of reality. The participants are promoting their understanding of environmental problems, which they believe will be good for Chinese society and that should therefore be communicated to their readers. They are not merely presenting facts without any opinions attached or neutrally quoting the viewpoints of news actors.

Discussion and Conclusion

This case study offers a perspective for understanding journalism in China, especially environmental journalism during a particular period in time. Although making a claim to objectivity, this group of environmental journalists are not practicing an objective journalism on the American model. They recognize objectivity as a norm of good journalism on the one hand but on the other hand follow their perceptions of what the role of journalists should be in covering environmental problems. These perceptions have reflected the influences of the Confucian tradition: the stress on the need to educate the people and on the importance of personal opinions. They have appropriated American journalistic norms in order to justify their intention to take on this role. The participating journalists in this study have rejected the idea of absolute objectivity, making it clear that they feel it is essential that their reports convey meaning. Their reports are organized within frameworks arising from their personal judgments of environmental problems. In addition the similarity between the schemas in their minds and in the texts shows that their own opinions are being reflected in their reports. The claim to objectivity and the specific understanding of objectivity in this context legitimates the practices of this group of environmental journalists in 'objectively' reporting on environmental problems, but from their own perspectives. Although the journalists attempt to construct a neutral position and are reluctant to express their own opinions too obviously, their reports, nevertheless, embody their judgments and perceptions. This is therefore not only a case of frame-setting in Bruggemann's model - in which journalists put their cognitive frames into their reports (Bruggemann, 2014) - but also a case of the appropriation of the American norm of objectivity that views the necessity of separating facts from opinions. Such an instance of frame-setting also manifests itself in the exclusion of the agenda of climate change and global warming.

The journalists' definition of objectivity justifies the connection between their perceptions of, and the newspapers' representation of, environmental problems, since they take for granted that their reports should be guided by a framework arising from their judgments of the situation. Opinions embodied in the reports are their own opinions and are legitimated by making a claim to objectivity. Therefore, the journalists are using the journalistic norm of objectivity to mask their opinions, which are not favorable to the CCP and its economic policy priorities, and to hide the influence of their subjective opinions in their reports. That is to say, these environmental journalists' professional claim to objectivity becomes a camouflage for their subjective interpretation of environmental events. They go beyond the basic facts of environmental problems in order to provide interpretations of the causes and consequences. They advocate what they believe needs to be done for the sake

of the environment by offering such interpretations. In this case, the features of Chinese journalism as well as the media ecology in which Chinese journalism operates should be taken into account in order to understand the particular way in which environmental journalists understand and practice objectivity.

In the first place this is to do with the participants' understanding of the role of journalism and of the media ecology within which environmental journalism operates. The participants believe it is meaningless to write a report without a clear and prominent theme, merely enumerating facts without interpreting them. They see "telling the truth" as the role of journalists, which is evidence of being influenced by the Confucian tradition. By the 'truth', they mean both facts and the meanings of these facts. Reports need to tell readers not only about what has happened but also about how to understand what has happened. In other words, journalists have a role as educators of the people as well as guardians of society. According to the journalists who participated in this study, the practice of integrating the meaning of facts into "balanced/objective reports" has been accepted by their newsrooms and peers as a paradigm of good practice. From their explanations, one can discover that the legacy of Confucian intellectualism actually guides them to practice a type of journalism that sees a journalist's role as to interpret the meaning of news events and to educate readers with "the truth" because readers may be incapable otherwise of understanding the truth and telling 'right' from 'wrong'.

However, it is necessary within the current media ecology in China to conform to the image of being objective. To stay objective, i.e. to present and balance information and views from different news sources, legitimates the embodiment of their own perspectives in their reports. This is because, under current working conditions, it is better and safer for journalists to appear to be objective rather than acting as opinion leaders. According to the study participants, expressing opinions too strongly and openly in reports often risks running into big problems. Obviously this can be interpreted as trying to avoid violating the reporting taboos set in the Communist tradition. To be objective is thus a journalistic strategy by which journalists can interpret reality but avoid post-publication retribution from the political authorities, especially when these opinions are not in line with the economic priority of the CCP and may even have the potential to impair the economic interests of its allies. This strategy and the purposes and the consequences of using this strategy however are different from those analyzed in Tuchman's and Gitlin's work (Tuchman, 1972; Gitlin, 1980) and from that in Zhang's research (Zhang, 2014). In this study, objectivity is adopted by journalists to express (their own) opinions without inviting political punishment. One important outcome of this is the clear presentation of frames opposing the dominant modernization ideology in China. This

is not at all Tuchman's "escaping responsibility" argument, Gitlin's "reinforcing the dominant hegemony" thesis or Zhang's "patriotism promotion" statement. In addition, this study reveals that it is their own (rather than news actors') opinions that journalists want to express, which Tuchman's work has not addressed.

In addition, to be objective is a strategy that can help the participants consolidate their cultural authority in defining reality, which can be seen as a boundary maintenance exercise. This is because, when covering environmental problems, the journalist's authority in defining reality is challenged by various social actors. Among others, officials, governments and experts are three major social actors that compete with journalists for control over who has the authority to define reality. After all, at the present time, political control over journalism remains in place. Therefore, governments and political authorities are still the main reality definers in two ways: as media censors and as news sources. Meanwhile, experts, such as water scientists, geologists, and biologists, are often invited to contribute their views as news sources. In the experts' domains of expertise, the journalists are amateurs and therefore lose epistemic authority to experts. Apart from the three main social actors, NGOs and environmental victims also join the struggle for control over defining environmental problems. NGOs actively seek to collaborate with environmental journalists in their campaigns and look for a way into media discourse. Environmental victims focus their hopes on environmental journalists to help them to obtain justice, and therefore have an interest in trying to influence the interpretations of environmental problems in media reports. The challenges from these social actors however can be managed if the credibility of the information cited from them has to be checked by journalists, who decide what is to be included and how these inputs are presented. In so doing, the journalists may be able to win the power struggle among social actors over who has the authority to define reality.

Therefore, this case study suggests that the norm of objectivity is used by these journalists as an effective strategy. Although this point echoes scholarly research that has also seen objectivity as a sort of strategy (Zelizer, 1993; Bishop, 1999; Carlson, 2007; Boudana, 2011; Tuchman, 1972), here in the Chinese context objectivity is used for a different purpose: for journalists to shoulder social responsibility, increase their political safety, and obtain journalistic authority in defining reality in environmental reporting.

Given the background of the participants (explained in the methodology section), it is not surprising to see them bear the imprint of the classic US-style professional norms that have become a sort of paradigm guiding their practice. There are also institutional influences on these journalists who are from the same press group as they have striking common ground in their understanding of objectivity and

perception of environmental problems as well as in their reports. However, their explanations imply that the imported US-style professional norm - objectivity - has been appropriated and integrated into their practice of Chinese environmental journalism. At the same time, Chinese journalism is far from being monolithic, and instead is characterized by diversity. In addition, the situation may have changed along with the changes in social, political and economic conditions. Future research could fruitfully examine environmental journalists' practices and beliefs in other news organizations or in more recent years to see whether the situation discussed here is universal and can be generalized as well as whether it has been different from the time when this study was conducted. It is also worth examining if the absence of the agenda of climate change and global warming can be found in the environmental coverage of other media outlets in China.

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[2] The names of the two newspapers and journalists are removed in order to protect the two newspapers and the journalists interviewed in this study.

[3]According to the interviews.

[4]According to the interviews.