



New opportunities for environmental and climate change journalism in China

REPORT

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Coverphoto: Wang Youngchen
Chinese journalists researching for a story about building dams in China.

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1 Introduction and overview

1.1 Introducing the project

There is widespread dismay at the environmental consequences, both for China and for the rest of the world, of China's rapid industrialisation. In China the government has shown concern and responded; many non-governmental environmental organisations have been set up and the media have demonstrated awareness of the issues. This report focuses on how environmental and climate-change issues are reflected by Chinese journalists.

In June 2009, a 10 day course on climate change and environmental journalism in China was held in Beijing, by the *Caijing Fellowship Programme* of *Caijing* magazine, then China's foremost financial magazine and a leading exponent of investigative journalism, and *International Media Support*.¹

The *China Media Centre* was asked to interview the 10 participants and some of their lecturers and to report on the course, which took place in Beijing and in Copenhagen. The interviewers approached most of the course participants and some of their lecturers in Beijing and interviewed them there. A small number of additional interviews with other Chinese media professionals were conducted later. Selections from these interviews, which give a comprehensive picture of the participants thinking on climate-change reporting and environmental reporting, are presented in section 2.

The interviewees varied from mature, established journalists with a clear brief to cover the environment, to young reporters for whom the environment was a new or tangential beat. There was an official government spokesman who had been an environment journalist and there were several environment specialists who were not journalists, but who had strong professional interests in environment journalism.

At the outset the interviewers committed themselves to not revealing the identities or making possible the identification of the respondents. Each interviewee, or group of interviewees, is given a reference number (e.g. R1, R2, R3) in the text. The interviewers were Dr Marina Svensson, Alja Kranjec, Chang Yiru, Dr Zeng Rong and Prof Hugo de Burgh. Additional assistance has been rendered by Aurogeeta Das and Guo Xu. Sam Geall acted as editorial consultant.

1.2 Environmental governance in China

China has always been a country of climatic extremes; there has long been a need to manage water, and for several centuries huge dust storms have driven forward the great deserts of north and west. Therefore, there have long been debates in China about not only water management, but also the exploitation of flora and fauna.

However, from the early twentieth century through into the Maoist era, China adopted a Soviet-influenced view of human progress, which demanded that many forests be eliminated, rivers dangerously diverted, fishing stocks

¹ In November 2009, *Caijing's* pioneering editor Hu Shuli resigned, along with many of the magazine's senior reporters, to found *Caixin Media*, which now publishes *Century Weekly* magazine.

depleted, rare species extinguished and mining allowed to ravage huge areas. This period of environmental destruction has been well documented by Shapiro (2001).

The beginning of a change in attitudes can be dated from the 1972 United Nations-led "Stockholm Conference" on the environment, which stimulated interest in environmental matters among certain Chinese officials, particularly Qu Geping, who later became chairman of the Ninth National People's Congress Environment and Resources Protection Committee.

In 1988, China established the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) as a government agency. In the spring of 1989, an internal reference circular (restricted circulation publication for officials) published an article by Zhou Guangzhao, a leading nuclear physicist, and Hu Angang, an influential economist, which identified 10 environment threats and characterised them as more dangerous to China's future than political threats at that time. The article concluded that environmental problems threatened the survival of the Chinese nation (Li 2009). China's first environmental protection law was adopted later that year.

In 1998, the central government upgraded SEPA to the status of "sub-ministry", and in 2008, SEPA became the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP). However, despite its enhanced status, the MEP is not the only government body concerned with environmental protection; responsibility for ecological issues often lies with other institutions, such as the Ministry of Water Resources or the National Development and Reform Commission, China's leading economic planners. Moreover, provincial, municipal and county Environmental Protection Bureaus (EPBs) do not answer to the MEP, but to local governments. For example, a provincial EPB reports to the provincial governor, who will also be responsible for its financing. (For more detail about the decentralisation of Chinese environmental governance, see Economy 2004).

In the era of economic reform, unchecked private enterprise has to a large degree replaced state pursuit of rapid economic growth and development as the main cause of environmental destruction. Lack of clarity over responsibilities, the decentralisation of environmental governance and the inability of the centre to impose its will aggravate the problem. For example, powerful city mayors tend to consider rapid GDP growth and narrowly conceived "modernisation" as benchmarks of high political achievement. (Although, as we will see in the findings below, there is a perception among some journalists that this is changing.) Planning controls and public participation mechanisms are frequently overridden and rich developers often wield a great deal of power.

China's major environmental problems include:

- Water scarcity and contamination from agricultural chemicals;
- Industrial air and water pollution;
- Air pollution from vehicles and coal fires;
- Soil erosion and desertification;
- Destruction of biodiversity hotspots;
- Deforestation;
- Acid rain from sulphur dioxide pollution; and
- Increasing greenhouse-gas emissions.

Chinese policymakers are well aware of the scale of these environmental problems. International events such as the 2008 Olympic Games, the 2010

Shanghai Expo and the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou continue to focus attention on air and water pollution in China's cities.

Pan Yue, a vice minister at the MEP and once a particularly outspoken official, though sidelined in recent years (Watts 2009), described the situation thus:

"[China's environmental crisis] has arisen, basically, because our mode of economic modernisation has been copied from western, developed nations. In 30 years, China has achieved economic results that took a century to attain in the west. But we have also concentrated a century's worth of environmental issues into those 30 years. While becoming the world leader in GDP growth and foreign investment, we have also become the world's number one consumer of coal, oil and steel – and the largest producer of CO₂ and chemical oxygen demand (COD) emissions." (Zhou 2007)

As environmental concern has increased among officials and among the public, this has to some extent been matched with increasing citizen involvement in compliance. In 2006, SEPA (now the MEP) claimed to have received more than 600,000 letters of complaint about environmental incidents and more than 100,000 petitions. The principles of transparency and accountability are now widely understood, even where the practice is lacking. In May 2008, a decree on open government information became operative. This requires government agencies to publish the results of investigations into areas such as environmental protection, public health and food safety. It also establishes a function for citizens to request information (Horsley 2007). In practice, however, the continued existence of state secrets legislation continues to interfere with this progress towards establishing the public's right to know.

The growth of environmental non-governmental organisations is another notable development in environmental governance. In 2005, one count said there were approximately 2,750 environmental NGOs in China – half of which were government-organised NGOs, or "GONGOs", and half of which were genuinely non-governmental, of which 40% were student organisations (Xie 2009).

There are still many restrictions on the establishment and operation of Chinese NGOs, and many groups only conduct educational and awareness-raising activities. However, a notable exception to the norm occurred in 2005, when a group of 56 green NGOs wrote an open letter supporting SEPA's opposition to 30 large infrastructure projects that had not undergone proper environmental impact assessments. This eventually resulted in the introduction of new regulations on public participation in environmental protection.

Observers continue to note advances as well as set-backs in China's environmental governance. For instance, SEPA established five regional inspection and enforcement centres in 2006 in order to try and overcome obstacles caused by decentralisation and fragmentation. Analysts have noted recently the environmentally friendly character of China's stimulus package in response to the world economic crisis. According to HSBC (Finamore and Wang 2009), US\$51 billion of the money was "green" stimulus, including rural infrastructure and public transportation, accounting for 86% of the \$59 billion in environmental spending allocated by governments worldwide.

1.3 China's media landscape

Although news production in China still operates in an authoritarian political system, in which the political leadership aims to guide and control both the media and public opinion, the Chinese media environment has developed significantly as a result of dramatic ideological and socio-economic changes. These include: commercialisation; globalisation; the increased social tension between the poor and the rich; and the rising consciousness of media's social and cultural responsibilities in Chinese public discourse.

In the 1990s, the major characteristic of the increasingly commercialised Chinese media was that they were subject to often contradictory forces: the market's commercial line and the Chinese Communist Party's political line (cf. Zhao 1998). Today, they have to consider the expectations of the public as well; they need to be more responsive to customers, to cover issues that interest them with treatments that appeal. At the same time, the CCP calls upon the media to "supervise" official institutions as a way of curbing widespread and serious problems, such as corruption and the negligent implementation of laws and policies. These developments have brought about more critical and investigative reporting and a reinvigorated role for the media as a mediator between state and citizens. Investigative reporting has, over the past 20 years, sometimes been vigorously undertaken and widely valued, although interpretation varies (cf. de Burgh 2003, 2003a; Tong 2008; Wang 2009).

Another factor that has contributed to the growth in investigative reporting is a developing professionalism among journalists, who increasingly see themselves as scrutinising the powerful and protecting the weak and vulnerable. Several newspapers and magazines, including *China Youth Daily*, *Southern Weekend*, *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *Caijing*, have a reputation for publishing critical and investigative stories. Since the early 1990s, there has also been a proliferation of investigative programmes on television, such as *News Probe* and *Focal Point*. As of January 2010, Caixin Media's new weekly print magazine, *Century Weekly*, staffed by many former reporters and editors from *Caijing* magazine, is following suit.

However, the media remain under government supervision and stories can be killed by government at local or provincial level; local media may find it risky to investigate abuses by people who are powerful in their own locality and therefore feed the stories to journalists from elsewhere in the hope both of fulfilling what they see as their professional duty and of reciprocal help later.

In the West, the influence of the media on public perceptions of environmental issues has been studied by a number of academics, including Boykoff and Rajan (2007), who found that "journalism and public concerns have shaped decisions in climate science and policy, just as climate science and policy have shaped media reporting and public understanding". Other studies see the media as agenda-setting, or at least having a powerful influence, in determining how people see the issue (cf. Wilson 1995; Ungar 2000; Corbett and Durfee 2004).

In recent years, there have been cases where Chinese journalism seems to have shaped public opinion, influenced policy and instigated lawmaking, such as with the suspension of a series of dams on the Nu River in southwest China in 2004, which was apparently the result of a sustained media campaign – though it is always difficult to quantify the extent to which the media have affected policymaking.

Citizens' concerns also have some influence upon the Chinese media. Media outlets have long operated hotlines for citizens to report malpractice by officials or other abuses. Investigative columns and programmes pay great attention to these; at editorial meetings researchers highlight the most useful of thousands of logged calls, texts and emails.

As we shall see from the research below, Chinese journalists are increasingly aware of the importance of environmental issues to China, as well as of China's responsibility to the world. However, the findings also indicate that, in the view of most journalists, this is rather more as a result of government policy than public demand or journalists' autonomous "enlightenment".

2 Findings

2.1 Reporting the environment: the current situation

The course participants interviewed by China Media Centre in June 2009 were almost all journalists committed to examining environment issues, and were therefore likely to be positive about the increasing attention given to green issues in Chinese life.

However, some saw the ways in which the authorities have reacted as a manifestations, or perhaps catalysts, of other developments. The following are excerpts from the interviews:

1. *The situation has changed out of all recognition recently. Investigations have created such transparency as to, in effect, have metamorphosed into a penal system. In the past, when environment dereliction was identified, the government tended to collude in a cover-up; now they allow exposure. Of course the officials responsible are not adequately penalised, because they tend to be moved to another area rather than lose their jobs entirely; however, environment awareness has become a criterion by which to judge officials, that's why I say investigations have become a kind of penal system. [R3]*
2. *In the past, the local authorities didn't give much weight to the environment, such that if you were to find fault with their 'rush for growth' then you'd most likely meet with obstruction. Now the local authorities, at least on the face of it, have a better approach, they won't openly hinder you much. [R1]*
3. *There have been many changes over the past two years; official attitudes have been transformed, the personnel at the [MEP] have changed, the whole outlook is quite different to two years ago. The fact that the former minister, Xie Zhenhua, is now on the National Development and Reform Commission is important. [R1]*
4. *The biggest change is the political focus on environmental issues. Then there's the fact that the environmental agency has adopted new media policies; environment is a new priority within the media; journalists are more competent; there's new legislation on access to information and the emergence of environmental NGOs. I note that [in the case of my own magazine] in the past four years our circulation has gone up 10-fold, quality is immensely better; you yourself compare 2005 editions with now and you will see the difference very clearly, in both content and finish. [R15]*
5. *The environment is by no means a sensitive topic now, quite the reverse. It is a very important topic, providing opportunities for a great deal of independent reporting. [R15]*

Many also perceived changes within the media professions:

6. *There have been enormous changes. For example reporters understand that environment issues are not narrowly environmental. Southern Me-*

tropolis Daily or Beijing News Daily will cover the environment stories from a social angle, whereas Caijing covers from an economic and financial angle and Xinhua News Agency will concentrate on government policy. [R11]

7. At the start, we had to be skillful in suggesting ideas to the media. For example, if we wanted to propose a subject to the media we'd be careful not to be too subjective but to offer a variety of perspectives, to find a means by which to attract their interest so that over time you could cultivate their need for what you had to offer. [R7]
8. Domestic stories come in two types; the customers for provincial and local media are local people so they will cover stories from their areas whereas magazines such as Caijing, with its macroeconomic focus, will cover only stories of much wider scope or implication. [R6]
9. My balance sheet is as follows: First, the content of environment coverage in the media has increased year by year. Second [there has been a marked change in approach]. Formerly, when the media paid attention to environment issues they did so in a collective way, out of a sense of public service. For example, typically reports would be arranged in response to the MEP's activities, to which we would be specially invited... [Now] the media are much more individuated. They will not automatically cover whatever the ministry or NGOs have put on; they are looking for 'hot' news rather than [diary stories]. Caijing, for example, pays a lot of attention to climate change because of its potential to influence our future industrial development. Caijing doesn't wait for others to set the agenda, Caijing makes it. [R15]

Many saw greater environmental awareness among the population as a whole, which some respondents attributed to the media:

10. The Huai River has been polluted for a long time now, but we have only understood the effects of the quality of groundwater in the last few years and that on account of the illnesses of the locals being reported. Maybe most people didn't used to think that reporting this kind of situation was very important. [R1]
11. The [local] governments are active too, though their activism may be as a consequence of media stimulation. Some top people or representatives see our reports and realise there are issues to be dealt with from reading the papers, and then take our side. [R6]

The scope of what was considered to be environmentally relevant journalism was seen to have broadened:

12. The reason I signed up [for the meeting after which the interview took place] is because I have two areas of specialisation in my work: finance and capitalisation. Finance is closely connected with domestic banks and these include the carbon-trading bank, in other words green credits. This year [during the financial crisis] the banks are especially politically aware and therefore green credits and the aspect of policy guidance are matters to which I pay great attention. [R9]

One respondent attributed his and his colleagues' increasing professionalisation to the influence of foreign media:

13. I was very impressed by Wall Street Journal reporting of environmental issues in China. It was researched very empirically and reported fairly. This

had a great influence on our reporters and we now do investigative stories much better. [R11]

Some reporters sensed that there are some characteristics of environment reporting that were specific to China:

14. *In China, environmental issues are never just about the environment, but they are social issues, so that the best stories may come from very experienced social or policy reporters. [R3]*
15. *What matters is [not public opinion], but that the leadership has its attention attracted, because it has the interest in doing something about it and the resources. Its members use, in particular, such media as People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency [state-controlled media outlets]... so therefore these are of necessity the most influential media. [R12]*

2.2 Range of stories and major themes

Respondents gave many illustrations of their tasks as journalists working on environment issues, from simple reports of policy announcements to complex investigations involving subterfuge. The range of activities was extensive. Here is a selection:

1. *There was the Bohai Sea pollution case, when the Bohai became a kind of "dead sea". Then there was the Hebei story of how groundwater reserves were drained off. Mostly it was an environment issue because once the water had been drained off, huge fissures opened up to the extent that people thought there had been an earthquake, yet it was all because of the water problem. [R1]*
2. *The best example of what we do is the Nu River case [when media and environmental pressure caused the temporary suspension of a huge dam project in southwest China]; we look at government's public policies and their relations with the environment. [R8]*
3. *I discovered that the source of much of the water transferred to other places is in Sichuan province, all as a result of government actions and the support of the Yellow River Authority (YRA). The YRA is the beneficiary, Sichuan is the victim. A large number of experts from Sichuan provided evidence on the process of water transfer... in the end the YRA's arguments were found to be full of errors and the whole project was overturned. [R8]*
4. *We looked at why the capital markets made such a fuss over [environment issues], lifting the curtain we began to understand the context and explain to our readers that this was to do with climate change – that there were big prospects. We are very interested in reporting on all aspects of marketing, especially the implications of the environment, not only for finance but also for marketing. [R9]*
5. *The possible radiation effects of magnetic-levitation, or "maglev", trains. [R9]*
6. *Lately Focus Report [an investigative programme on state-run TV] exposed the case of an enterprise in the Pearl River Delta that had caused pollution; the report caused widespread reverberations. [R12]*

7. "Factory, built on rubbish dump, explodes". After I had produced a report with this headline, the departments responsible were dissatisfied and came to our offices to protest. [R12]
8. I've covered major conferences on climate change and current actions on promoting the low-carbon economy. Now, my main scope includes both energy and climate change, though in fact energy is the main part because energy and the economy are so interconnected. Thus policies, including those emanating from China and concerning new energy sources, are paid great attention. [R3]
9. Then there are the banks; in China, financial credit is readily available and though the risks are great the banks are doing their utmost to lend; there are [environmental] projects which show no return, houses and goods that can't be sold; we examine these investments. [R3]
10. After the pollution of the Yellow River, the incidence of leukemia in villages in which the water had been drunk [R3]
11. I've also reported about carbon trading, with the emphasis on the introduction of the idea, in order to inform citizens, ensure that Chinese enterprises are aware of this mechanism. Those in essence are the main purposes of the reports. [R3]
12. After I published something about the changes in the lakes of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, I gave it to a reporter from Science Times. Once I'd explained it to him, he spread the word about the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the situation of the lakes and the flooding, to a much wider audience. [R3]
13. I asked a driver: where is there pollution? So I got to a sewage outlet, right next to a village which was using the water. That very day a man died, apparently of leukemia. And the children mostly had white hair. [R3]
14. I reckon the most classic story is that famous Huai River report [about water pollution in a major central China river], in which CCTV revealed the severe extent of pollution: that opened the floodgates, leading to the raising and resolving of a whole series of environmental issues, such that I consider this story should be regarded as the most efficacious example [R15]

2.3 How do journalists cover climate change and the environment?

Some of the journalists' descriptions provided useful illustrations of how reporters work. Here are some examples:

1. I went to Shanxi province to look into how so much investment had somehow gone into activities which cause pollution. In particular I looked into [a company] and, after the authorities had given me some information, I had questions that required me to address myself to many government offices. I found everybody had run away; either there was nobody present at all, or the decision-makers were absent; then I just waited and waited until they had to provide me with something. I hung around for five days. [R3]
2. I did an in-depth investigation of a cancer village, stating that it was on account of the ore-washing at the mines that there was so much contamination. This story had a profound effect on me, for despite the proximity of the village to the industrial works, the villagers had no power to

raise the matter; though their health had been devastated, they had no power either to protect themselves in the future or to obtain redress. In order to prove that the cancer derived from the works, they needed to get a lawyer to take up the case, yet they had no money with which to do this. I was also affected by the fact that the factory disbursed a few thousand yuan to each village, meaning that in the end each village had a few tens or maybe a hundred yuan, although each year [the factory] contributed very large sums to the environmental protection bureau. This report I did was pretty sensitive at the time and at first it didn't get through editorial. However, in the end I found a way. [R8]

3. Investment is intimately connected with environment issues. The National Bureau of Statistics publishes the capital allocation for each area, so I take myself off to an area in which the investment is particularly high and ask why. [R3]
4. When we went to Gansu, they didn't present us with the true situation but some well-prepared falsehoods.... To undertake this kind of activity you need experience. You need experience to know when officials are pulling the wool over your eyes. On more than one occasion I have used my chemistry training secretly to check the water samples when I believe that I am being given false information. [R3]
5. I am concerned about the manner in which we deal with contentious issues. For example, some time ago my colleagues in Shanghai did a report on the highest building in the city... They queried whether, as claimed, that highest building was truly energy-saving. Taking another example, some days ago I saw another report on a building over 100-metres high, a post-Sichuan earthquake rebuild that was to be a model of energy saving; it was reported that there will be many solar energy facilities and that the building will supply renewable energy to several hundred cars and so forth. But do these facilities really save energy as claimed?

...As for contentious issues, let me contend that when raising climate change, journalists should not only pay attention to issues, but also investigate and take responsibility for their evaluation. Right now, we have many of these kinds of reports because [the central government of] China is trying to promote energy-saving and emissions reduction, but is this policy really taken seriously in rural areas? Is the data supplied to central government authentic? Are the policies really effective, are they even being implemented? These are all matters that need to be examined by the media. [R12]

6. [Investigating a steel smelter in Shandong province] wasn't simply a pollution issue. What made us look into it was that there was long-term pollution from two enterprises. But we wanted to know not only how this came about, but the connections to the infrastructure of the entire province. Once it had evolved into a political issue, one also had to consider the impact on the local authorities. Thus with these kinds of cases there are many layers of complications. You cannot just investigate the matter of the steel works, but you need to consider not only the influence on the whole area, but also the ramifications for local government. Indeed the MEP had already several times raised the issue of the steel enterprises with them, raising the issue of violation, telling them what they should do. You cannot just see it as a matter of one case of industrial pollution, but within the contexts of economic development and intra-governmental operations. [R1]

7. *I undertook two multi-layered investigations revolving around the Songhua River pollution incident [an industrial explosion that led to a toxic benzene slick in 2005]. First, no sooner had the incident taken place than I undertook a dynamic investigation as to what the background was, how it had made headway – that is what a dynamic investigation is. Second, I made a more polemical investigation as to why such an enterprise – a public enterprise – could be constructed in the vicinity of such an important river. I interviewed some specialists and discovered that it wasn't just the Songhua, but that this situation pertained to all China's great rivers, including the Yangtze River and the Yellow River.*

Once I had done this investigation, premier Wen Jiabao and the [then] vice premier Zeng Peiyan instructed that the MEP carry out a survey of all the rivers and the chemical factories in their environs. When the MEP had received this instruction, it carried out an investigation of the sources of pollution emanating from chemical factories around the rivers of the whole country – a massive operation. Following this report, a further order was produced requiring chemical engineering operations to have an emergency system and facilities necessary to deal with such emergencies. [R1]

8. *The deputy governor at night secretly lead a team to examine pollution – and whichever operations he found to be polluting, we exposed.[R6]*

2.4 The influence of environmental reporting

Some journalists described the conditions in which the media can be influential. These included the following examples:

1. *Since the Songhua River incident, the opportunities for environmental reports have grown, because public awareness has grown hugely. It is obvious that the public can express opinions very well, and that the media are not as constrained as previously, giving a tangible advantage to the public. Moreover, journalists themselves have been alerted to the issues by the situations they have found themselves in while reporting the environment, such that the situation has grown ever better. [R4]*

The respondents remembered only a few instances where they considered that a media story was known to have directly affected either policy or executive action. However, there was a general assumption that the target of their stories was the governing class as a whole, rather than the citizenry in general, and that awareness of the issues raised by environmental journalism was burgeoning among the people who mattered: those with the influence that might in time affect policy or practice of government:

2. *The most successful at raising awareness are those comprehensive media of good reputation, such as Caijing, Southern Weekend and Southern Metropolis Daily. Other specialist publications... have a feeble voice, their readership is too small... [R3]*
3. *There is no feedback, but since our readers are civil servants and business managers, I am sure that our stories have an influence. At the very least, they have learned of such concepts as global warming, so we carry out a function of popularising science. [R3]*
4. *What matters is that the report attracts the attention of the leadership, because it has the interest in doing something about it and the resources. [R15]*

2.5 Whence do journalists get their stories?

For some journalists, the internet was an important medium for finding stories:

1. *As far as sources are concerned, being a journalist gets better all the time, the accumulation of contacts is such that your information gets continually better. For example, I covered an English carbon trading company that was laying off workers; this intelligence came through my network, through MSN or on internet communication. After all, the company wouldn't announce layoffs of its own volition, it was revealed through chatting – and that's an advance! [R4]*
2. *In effect, our news department is cooperating with web sources. Once a story has been launched on the web, we follow up with a detailed investigation. There are more and more such cases and there is a tendency for the influence of such reports to grow markedly. [R8]*

For many respondents, there was a clear role for environmental NGOs, and the social networks that link them to journalists:

3. *As to the contribution of the unofficial bodies [environmental NGOs], their appeals and their ways of raising public consciousness play more and more of a role. [R1]*
4. *When I do environment reports, its usually in cahoots with unofficial bodies and a few environmentalists, I do a lot of liaising with environment enthusiasts. [R1]*
5. *The most important sources in Henan province are unofficial environmentalists, they are usually keen to connect with the media [R1]*
6. *The fact that NGOs can now raise funds from donations has been very important, as has the tax relief on donors. [R3]*

While most of the respondents had come into contact with NGOs, some were not admirers, or did not use their resources:

7. *Green habitat, Oxfam, Greenpeace... there are lots of [environmental NGOs]. We want to be fair, but we think some of the environmentalists are a bit extremist, so we cannot simply take up their causes – we need to balance them with other specialists in order to be equitable. [R3]*
8. *I feel that the environment organisations, the non-profit green groups, have problems – the whole sector is in a mess. [R1]*
9. *Voluntary groups are too insignificant to deal with. Government is our best source, for example, for law-enforcement operations [R6]*
10. *I believe that those like Greenpeace do a lot of good things, but I think they have some problems. The two best things they've done since coming to China are first, the attack on genetic modification of plants, directed at US companies. Second, the attack on the Jinguang Company [a pulp and paper subsidiary of Indonesian conglomerate Sinar Mas Group] for its deforestation [in Yunnan province]. These two companies I consider wicked in the extreme; yet Chinese people have far worse companies than those to deal with. In general though, when I try to work with these unofficial bodies I usually end up with nothing very conclusive. By comparison, I get more out of working with government, since in the final analysis its government*

action that's needed to get things done. No matter whether the unofficial organizations or the media have a story, its officialdom that permits revelation, so I reckon that government's attitude is more important [to the success of a story]. [R1]

A government official said he regarded NGOs as playing a subsidiary role, though a similar one to the MEP:

11. We take the initiative in suggesting sources to the media, so that the media will take up the issues and advance peoples understanding through their reports. [R12]

On the other hand, the media were also credited with taking the initiative:

12. Who initiates reporting? Some issues are broached by the media – and only thereafter do they get the public to pay attention or the leadership to attach importance to it. Once senior people have made their comments, then a wave of activity is stimulated by those same comments, thereafter things start to slow down a bit. For example, the 1995 issue of the management of the Huai River came about because a particular CCTV reporter did a story on the Huai River pollution, which was broadcast and caught the attention of a member of the State Council, who convened relevant bodies to study the topic and subsequently put in place an engineering project to control of the Huai River. Most certainly this was lead by the media. [R15]

2.6 Obstacles to reporting

What were the obstacles to reporting, or to publication, and could the reporters challenge them? Here are some responses:

- 1. It sometimes happens that the editor considers what we have written to be too sensitive and wants to spike it, but in this case it is up to you to fight. I have fought back fiercely on two occasions, and won both times. [R8]*
- 2. The biggest difficulty for environmental reporting is that its specificity is not recognised or promoted. First, we ought to have space, or even pages, allocated such that it becomes a recognised genre or classification of report. Second, environmental journalists need their own professional body. Third, since environmental issues are often so controversial, sometimes environment reporters come up against limitations rather more than others. [R8]*
- 3. I give a great deal of thought to the obstacles to good environmental reporting. We at Xinhua News Agency [a state-run news agency] mainly rely on coverage by the central news desk, which has a specialist environment reporter. Other so-called reporters merely copy government documents and convert them into stories without doing any additional research. We don't think much of that. The reports are lazy and this is very bad for the reputation of Xinhua. We need all on-the-ground reports, not rewritten press releases from local authorities and local environment bureaus. In the English language department, we badly want to do our stories ourselves, using our own contacts, rather than take handed-down stories from the centre, where so much of this rewriting of press releases takes place. We argue that it is essential for Xinhua's international strategy that it be not a propaganda mouthpiece, but a real journalistic organisation, sourcing*

its own stories. We have dual mandates: both government spokespeople and journalists. It will take a long time for Xinhua to develop in the way it wants. [R11]

When asked about the obstacles to the reporting of environmental issues, the most frequently mentioned was the competence of journalists. The second most mentioned was the general failure of journalists and editors to understand the significance of environment issues, such that the work of reporting them was not accorded adequate respect.

4. *The biggest problem is that I don't have the appropriate knowledge, particularly specialist knowledge. [R1]*
5. *The first [problem] is journalists' lack of appropriate qualifications, since the specialists often heartily disagree – so how can the journalist, without scientific background, cope? That is a real difficulty. The second is related to the social, political and economic ambience; right now, people are thinking only about economic development... [R3]*
6. *The shortcomings are obvious; most reporters working in this field have no appropriate academic foundation; they haven't come from a science and engineering background, although that in itself need not impede you if you go and study enough to be able to communicate with the experts... At the start of the avian flu crisis, the media all scrambled to get to the fore, you could see the whole lot of them – no matter what kind of media – their editorial departments and teams and reporting details in a great herd, muddled in their judgment, muddled in their editing, with no original point of view – just rushing at it, regardless of whether they themselves were sourcing the material or whether it was accurate or of any quality. [R4]*
7. *Journalists tend to come from a literary background, but in this field they are hamstrung. As Caijing does, we should recruit science and engineering graduates. [R3]*
8. *Some media shift their reporting personnel around too much, so that they have no time to develop expertise and the reporters have too shallow a grasp of the issues. This is a deficiency. [R12]*

Some respondents saw the diverse educational backgrounds of Chinese journalists as useful:

9. *Everyone's educational background is different and everyone can make mistakes, so the fact that, for example, I studied chemistry and he studied economics means we can pool our ideas – and this is likely to make for a more complete story. [R3]*
10. *In fact, one of the joys of doing environment stories is that you get people from quite different fields working together. [R3]*

However, the sheer complexity of the stories and of the ways you need to approach them were still said to be obstacles:

11. *We lack journalists with expertise and we lack the funds to investigate. And even if we had them, the first problem is how to get at the issue, how to find appropriate stories from the reports of climate change. The next one is how to cope with the controversies, for these matters are all controversial. [R3]*

12. Editors often do not recognise the news values of stories; also reporters do not properly translate the words of experts such that readers grasp the points; in the reporting of government policy it is useful to have good scientific examples of issues which have given rise to the policies. [R3]
13. Environmental issues, including damage from pollution or even the sources of pollution, are difficult to define and make judgments on. These matters are not, legally speaking, clear cut – as in a murder case, where there is a victim and a perpetrator; there can be a complicated series of challenges. To take a pollution example, it has been said that in a recent heat wave, Shandong province has seen many cases of malignant thyroid cancer, but who is to say if this really has any connection with pollution? A journalist cannot make a judgment, but even the specialists are wary of saying much, so that you are pretty much stymied on a topic like this. [R30]
14. If you go to look at an enterprise they'll have an explanation for the pollution and if you are not an expert it's pretty hard to tell truth from falsehood, it's so multifaceted. But I gather that the law enforcement officers, when they go investigating, they have software, they have the techniques. [R29]

Generally the respondents did not recognise many political limits to their reporting. More often, the obstruction came from commercial imperatives:

15. Were the newspaper completely commercial, it would publish virtually no environment stories. [R29]
16. I have never come across limits, either political or legal. [R1]
17. Really the censors don't influence us at all, they cannot interfere and they don't. [R1]
18. Sometimes for example, the editor will say he doesn't want to publish, so we can ask him why not. This is a normal process of disputation, he'll produce some reasons, sometimes he'll list some concrete ones and we'll consider them. For example he might say let's not publish or at least defer publication; we could look again at the form of the report, these kind of things, but on the whole his influence is not that great. [R1]

One reporter described encounters with corruption:

19. Sometimes people send a fax to a factory accusing it of polluting and demanding money, threatening to publicise the fact; because of this, when I, as a journalist, go to such a factory to discuss an environmental issue no sooner have I got there than they offer me money. [R1]

2.7 Unpublished stories

What kinds of stories failed to make it, being spiked before publication? There was no general rule. Here are some examples:

1. In Shandong province, I examined seepage from a chemical engineering factory – formaldehyde I think it was – a whole forest had died. It was harrowing. Even if I had not been a journalist, I would have found a way to get that story out. [R1]

2. *Near our home there was a village growing leeks, but strictly speaking those leeks should not have been eaten; they were being grown in close proximity to agricultural chemicals, a kind of chemical which contaminates water very easily; as a consequence, almost 80% of the villagers had cancer. I could not write such a shameful thing about my own hometown; had I written about my home thus I would have brought a lot of trouble on our heads. [R1]*

2.8 Solutions

Suggested solutions to reporters' problems and obstacles were of two kinds. First, journalists offered self-critical reflection on themselves and their profession. They said that they lacked the skills and the knowledge to do a good job – and that they needed to study and work harder to comprehend specialist topics and explain why they matter.

One argued for recruitment policies that reflect the complexity of environmental reporting:

1. *We should not let the experts get involved in the reporting; academics and journalists are separate species. We should recruit enthusiastic trainee journalists who have science degrees, or else provide science orientation courses for existing journalists. [R3]*

Second, some journalists considered that raising environmental awareness was not an issue that should be restricted to environmental journalism, but that the government and the public needed to become more receptive:

2. *If we want to get anywhere with making people understand the issues, we have to educate local government and local enterprise. We have to raise the consciousness level of the citizens. [R12]*

3 Conclusion

In the interviews for this report, one of the respondents stated:

The reporting of environment issues is having a profound effect on our country. The government sees the need to create consensus around the issues and therefore opens them up to public discussion and debate; news and information is opened up and a spirit of participation is fostered. [R12]

It seems that as environmental thinking affects more and more people in China, not only are attitudes to the environment changing, but also some attitudes to society and to political arrangements. In particular, the Chinese government's concerns about the environment seem to have led some parts of government to indulge, or to encourage, the kind of reporting to which it was in the past hostile. It is now more legitimate to point to failings in environment protection; sometimes acceptable to question decisions that appear to damage the environment; and commonplace to demand transparency and accountability in the name of environment.

At least one respondent overtly called for a greater role for journalists in questioning the efficacy of government policies on the environment:

Journalists shouldn't just pay attention to issues, but investigate and take responsibility for their evaluation. [R12]

Is it too much to imagine that as the environment impinges on the consciousness of more and more people, not only are attitudes to the environment changing, but also attitudes to society and to political arrangements? While individual and local choice in social and cultural life – and certainly economic life – is very much greater than it was 20 years ago, criticism of political decisions has had to be expressed with great care and often in circumscribed fora. However, the government's concern over the environment has altered this. The kind of activism to which the government has in the past been very hostile is now possible and even encouraged.

The interviews included in this report illustrate how the impact of environmental issues may be affecting China in that it is now legitimate to point to failings in environment protection; acceptable to question decisions that appear to damage the environment; commonplace to associate in order to defend the environment and axiomatic to demand transparency and accountability in the name of environment. One respondent at least was overtly calling for a much greater role for journalists in questioning the efficacy of government policies on the environment:

Right now we have many of these kind of reports because [the central government of] China is trying to promote energy saving and emissions reduction, but is this policy really taken seriously in the sticks? Is the data supplied to central Government authentic? Are the policies really effective, are they even being implemented? These are all matters that need to be examined by the media. [R12]

Journalists may therefore be finding that they are legally defensible when they investigate and report under the banner of environmental protection.

Indeed, they are acting, as they have done in China for some time in other areas of social life, as an arm of government in promoting environment awareness and calling for obedience to the new norms yet as critic when they reveal the failure of policies.

The findings of this study are that Chinese environment correspondents are reveling in the influence this may give them, even as they doubt their capacity adequately to respond to the challenges posed by taking the environment seriously and the responsibility for raising awareness and identifying transgressions. Just as they became the evangelists of China's economic revolution, so they may be becoming the promoters of environmental awareness. In the course of so doing, it may be that they are helping to create a new consensus about how decisions are being taken, and should be made, in their society.

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