

Section V

Environmental Journalism in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong

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Green Voices in Greater China: Harmony and Dissonance

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The Beas River Jockey Club, nestled in the bucolic green hills of the New Territories, is just a stone's throw from the border with Mainland China. Dewy bougainvillea blossoms glistened in the April sun when some twenty environmental reporters from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong gathered here for a two-day conference.

For Fang Sanwen, who just returned from a month-long reporting trip on the 3,000-kilometer path of sandstorms from Inner Mongolia to Beijing, the lush green world around him was almost unreal. His story on the villages deprived of water, crops, and hope by the encroaching desert spreads across three full pages of the Guangzhou-based *South Weekly*.

Environmental journalism has flourished in China over the past decade. Hundreds of reporters produced thousands of news stories and television documentaries covering subjects from the looming shortage of water resources to the endangered species in the wilderness. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, environmental reporting also has come a long way. Working closely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), environmental reporters have helped forge not only an environmental consciousness, but also a political activism that pressures the Hong Kong and Taiwanese governments for change. Together, they share a professional commitment to reporting environmental degradation and raising public awareness of the endangered ecological resources. But different political systems, various stages of economic development, and editorial priorities have created a wide divide among Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong environmental reporters.

Mainland China: Environmental Propaganda

The abundant crop of environmental stories in China has not come about spontaneously. After the Chinese government became a signatory of the Agenda

21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development at the 1992 Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), China's National People's Congress (NPC) launched a massive publicity campaign to raise environmental awareness. The Environmental Resources Protection Committee of the NPC set up a special taskforce for organizing and implementing environmental news coverage. For each of the following eight years, the taskforce drafted plans, assigned topics, planned reporting trips, and made timetables for the release of the feature stories. In short, the taskforce created a top-down structure, working with exemplary efficiency in mobilizing the news media to raise the environmental consciousness in China.

This political approval actually has given journalists greater freedom and opportunities to write on environmental topics. Over the past eight years, some 13,000 reporters from all news media organizations in China have produced an astounding 104,000 pieces of work, according to a study by the International Media Studies program at Tsinghua University. Environmental reporters from Mainland China at the conference stated they enjoy more freedom in pursuing their stories than other beat reporters. With the blessing from Beijing, they are able to obtain cooperation from local authorities in doing their investigative work on certain issues.

China has come a long way in recognizing the legitimacy of environmental concerns. Hu Kanping, editor of *China Green Times*, the second largest environmental newspaper in China with a circulation of 100,000, recalls when his paper was launched in 1985, the unclear mandate was to "clean the environment and cleanse the spiritual pollution." At that time, the officials had very vague ideas of what the environment meant and what needed protection.

With the deepening of China's economic reforms,

many officials traveling abroad have found that industrialized countries openly acknowledge the existence of environmental problems. In fact, the more developed the economy, the more environmentally conscious people become, which removes much of the stigma from facing up to the environmental problems.

Environmental subjects also turn out to be very popular with readers, listeners, and viewers, which in turn draw talented and enterprising young journalists into the field. Sun Yanjun, a young broadcaster at Tianjin People's Radio, has breathed life into otherwise boring programming by creating imaginative segments that promote greater appreciation of nature and awareness of environmental problems, such as "Environmental Guardian," "Walk about Global Village," "Green Alarm Bell," and "Green Jeopardy Games."

Fang Sanwen said his publication *South Weekly* (a popular weekly with a national readership of 200,000) was particularly suited for long features on environmental investigative work. With the support of his editor, Fang, another reporter, and a photographer rode an old jeep along the trail of sandstorms from the Alashan League in Inner Mongolia to the hills on the outskirts of Beijing. "We tried to tell the story behind the oft-repeated statistics: The number of sandstorms rose from five in the 1950s to 23 in the 1990s. The year 2000 alone saw 12 sandstorms, and in the first three months of this year, six have already been reported." Fang continued to explain that "behind the environmental degradation and economic losses is a whole series of problems affecting the society. The deterioration of meat, wool, and hide quality will force the pastoralists and ranchers to abandon their traditional livelihood and migrate to the cities. This impact on their culture is hard to imagine." The resulting report took the form of a diary, along with sidebars explaining scientific facts and policy debates.

Zhang Kejia runs her green page at the *China Youth Daily* every Wednesday. Her green page acts as a forum for the public to debate on environmental issues. She also has broadened the participation through Web site discussions (www.cyol.net.gb/cydgcn/).

Wang Yongchen, an award-winning veteran broadcaster at China Central Radio in Beijing, commented that environmental reporters are fired by a sense that they feel they can make a difference. The environmental journalists in Mainland China are not just the medium through which most people come to understand environmental issues, these journalists also make things happen and correct what goes wrong. Wang Yongchen captured this spirit in her statement that "in the absence of enforcement of environmental protection, we

journalists become guardians to the environment." Once while reporting on the ecological strains brought by population pressure and industrialization along the Yangtze River, Wang described in her radio program how the cruise ships threw plastic food containers into the waterway turning the 5,500-kilometer river into a giant public sewer. Within days of the broadcast, local officials were galvanized to action in the face of public outcry and the littering stopped. The result was a slightly cleaner river.

Similar positive actions resulting from Mainland reporters' exposés to protect the environment and save the endangered species abound. Television reports on the golden snub-nosed monkey and the Tibetan antelope all led to government intervention to protect the animals' habitats. Those are happy stories that received wide international publicity, but such reporting makes up only a small part of the environmental reporting in China. Most of the stories deal with water resources, forestry, and agriculture. Generally, stories praising the efforts by governmental agencies and enterprises to clean up the environment outnumber criticisms.

Mainland reporters also avoid politically sensitive topics. Not surprisingly the Three Gorges Dam is off-limits. "We support the government on major issues and direct our criticisms on minor issues," stated a Mainland reporter at the conference. Editors are unlikely to back their reporters in confronting officials. Moreover, for contentious stories it is difficult for reporters to get cooperation from local sources. In one of the conference sessions, an NGO representative showed pictures of a gigantic log on a flat bed truck with signs advertising logging opportunities in Tibet. Notably, although China's State Council has promulgated decrees banning logging nationwide, the Mainland Chinese reporters stated candidly that they would not report this story because it takes place in the Tibetan Autonomous Region where the enforcement of the bans is much less rigorous than in other parts of China. The rights and interests of ethnic minorities are so complex in China that environmental reporters do not feel that they are up to the task to take on these national issues.

Taiwan: No Holds Barred, Seeking Hot-Button Issues

Taiwanese reporters take pride in their role of building the environmental consciousness as well as forging the democratic movement on the island. The political pressure and censorship in Mainland China cause reporters from Taiwan to cluck their tongues. In today's Taiwan, political pressure towards the news media would make reporters even more rebellious towards the Taiwanese government. Working with local environmen-

tal NGOs, Taiwanese journalists have mobilized the public to pressure the government to enact laws to protect endangered species, to enforce logging bans, and to push for environmental justice affecting economically disadvantaged groups.

Lin Ju Sen, a senior reporter at the *United Daily News*, distributed his article clippings collected over ten years to showcase the range of his environmental reporting. For two years, he followed the trafficking of rhinoceros horns—used as an ingredient for traditional Chinese medicine—and filed stories with datelines from many countries. He also reported on the returning of orangutans, which were smuggled into Taiwan as pets, to their home in Southeast Asian jungles. Chiu Yu-tzu, a reporter with the English language *Taipei Times* stated that environmental reporters have *carte blanche* in choosing their stories in Taiwan. She commented that “there are no taboos and no politically sensitive topics for us.” She has written many conservation stories, ranging from black-faced spoonbills to Formosan rock macaques to preserving Chinese cypress forests in Chilan Mountain in central Taiwan.

Taiwanese reporters commented that in the past the news media cast the Nationalist (KMT) government officials as the “bad guys” on environmental issues while the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) used to play the role of environmental champions. As the DPP moved into power in the year 2000, the environmental movement has lost a clear-cut focus of the heroes versus villains. The building of the fourth nuclear reactor on the island was a hotly debated subject during the 2000 presidential campaign, which swept the DPP’s candidate Chen Shui-bian to power. But much of the debate was overshadowed by corruption charges against the ruling Nationalist Party and ironically, the environmental reporting on the nuclear power plant took a back seat.

Hong Kong: Environment as Local Health and Lifestyle Issues

For years, air pollution has been a staple subject for Hong Kong environmental reporters. The urban canyon of tall buildings traps emissions from vehicles and creates smog that poses health risks. Hong Kong environmental reporters have found it difficult to sustain reader interest in this chronic pollution problem. However, an event last year greatly energized environmental reporting. In October 2000, a coalition of green groups successfully challenged a HK\$7 billion (U.S.\$900 million) plan to build a rail spur in the New Territories that would cut through a wetland habitat for rare birds. The debate on protecting the wetlands, energetic anti-

rail demonstrations, and the final defeat of the proposed project gave environmental reporters an exciting story to report. Some of the campaign stories even appeared on the front page of the newspapers.

Hong Kong environmental reporters also have covered controversies over the building of a refuse treatment plant on Peng Chau Island and the creation of a Disney theme park on Lantau Island, both of these projects will adversely impact the coral reef. Ironically, after the NGOs scored the wetland victory, many Hong Kong legislators have become more cautious on environmental issues. Because Hong Kong’s economic growth is slowing and unemployment rising, legislators tend to avoid words and actions that could be perceived as anti-development by their constituents commented Olga Wong, a reporter at the *Ming Pao* newspaper.

Rising public attention on the potential health impacts from consuming genetically modified foods challenges environmental reporters to educate themselves in order to present a balanced picture to their readers, Wong says. She also noted that environmental news often is tucked in the community section of the newspapers. Many Hong Kong journalists find it difficult to elicit editor interest in environmental topics that do not have an immediate impact on Hong Kong, such as Mongolian sandstorms.

Needed: Technical Knowledge and Access to Information

All the reporters attending the *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum* in Hong Kong agreed that they need more training in the technical areas of environmental science, as well as an expanded knowledgebase in the global context of environmental problems. They also emphasized that learning from the personal experiences of veteran reporters and having thoughtful discussions on cultural and philosophical issues could help them do a better job.

The overwhelming amount of available scientific information, much of which is presented as hypotheses, poses special challenges for reporters to communicate to the readers. Another issue that challenges reporters while writing their stories is the new twist to the perennial theme of development competing with conservation. Specifically, the option to use newer technology to solve environmental problems created by older technology. Therefore, environmental reporters need to rethink their former dichotomous approaches to writing about the environment and explore the potential of new clean technology.

For a variety of reasons, some environmental prob-

lems have been all but ignored in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. For example, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the new dangers of high-tech indoor pollution have not been adequately addressed. As those economies are now heavily dependent on the electronic industries for growth, there is a reluctance to explore the health hazards from new sources of pollutants. In Mainland China sensitive questions of hazardous waste disposal and processing are rarely reported, for this issue is likely to highlight the tension between the rich coastal provinces and the poor inland provinces.

In a workshop session, Dr. Sai S. Chan (professor of medicine on leave from Oregon Health Science University) urged reporters to dig beneath the surface on environmental stories and not stop at the episodic level of reporting. Specifically, reporters should pay more attention to the range of possible solutions and how citizens can help the government to design laws to protect the environment. Dr. Chan gave a brief tour of intriguing topics in current international research on environmental health. For example, “gender discrimination” in the environment is a concept that refers to women’s greater vulnerability to environmental hazards because of their hormonal cycles. Research has shown that the sharp rise of female cancer rates in the last decade is directly linked to pollutants in the environment. “We protect the environment to protect ourselves,” Dr. Chan argued.

During the two days of the *Green NGO and Envi-*

ronmental Journalist Forum, environmental reporters made large strides in understanding each other and the different political and economic systems that shape their views. All the reporters, to some extent, feel the commercial pressure on responsible coverage of environmental issues. For example, reporters in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where newspapers are commercial enterprises, are keenly aware that environmental stories can hardly compete with sensational crime and sex stories in attracting readers and advertisers. Unless stories become political, public interest in environmental issues is difficult to sustain. Even Mainland Chinese environmental reporters wonder aloud if their publications would survive on their own without government subsidies.

Many journalists at the forum also mentioned that environmental reporters also need better writing and editing skills to tell a good story. In telling their stories however, the journalists agreed they must strike a balance between promoting awareness and remaining unbiased. All came to a consensus that it is in this area that reporters from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong can learn from each other. “We all use the Chinese language, but until now we have had less contact with each other than with other international environmental groups,” one participant stated. The frank discussions at the *Green NGO and Environmental Journalist Forum* promised to be the beginning of a stimulating exchange and friendship for those environmental reporters.

Harmony in Diversity: The Relationship Between Environmental Journalists and Green NGOs in China

Hu Kanping, Editor, China Green Times

Chinese environmental journalists and activists are both “green.” While they operate in different professional spheres they share feelings of social responsibility to fight against environmental degradation by unifying a variety of social forces. This common concern for the environment has created a solid basis for cooperation between journalists and environmental activists in China. However, because environmental journalists and green nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) ultimately play different roles in society, their methods, channels, goals, and range of influence differ. Therefore, Chinese environmental journalists and activists work both independently and together. Their similarities and differences can be expressed in the analogy that they are a harmonizing string quartet rather than ballet dancers moving with identical steps.

Reciprocity is the bond that ties environmental journalists and NGOs. As a journalist and editor for an environmental newspaper, I have been exploring successful ways to enhance social impacts of the news media by cooperating with both domestic and international NGOs for many years. For example, with the help of the *International Fund for Animal Welfare*, we at the *China Green Times* sent free subscriptions of environmental newspapers to biology and geography middle school teachers and teaching teams in Beijing. The Japanese NGO *OISCA* and my newspaper staff planted trees to create the Sino-Japanese Youth Green Memorial Forest. Some on the newspaper staff also have worked together with the Beijing-based NGO *Friends of Nature* to develop the “Return the Birds to the Blue Sky” campaign, which opposes the caging of wild birds. The

China Green Times also partnered with the *China Wildlife Protection Association* (Editor's Note: this is a government organized NGO, founded in early 1980s) to create National Student Green Reporting Teams, which provide middle and elementary school students with opportunities to learn about journalism and wild animals.

Through these activities, the *China Green Times* journalists not only attracted more readers throughout China, but also were able to identify new and relevant environmental problems to target in future reporting. The increased recognition and new areas of reporting improved our newspaper's reputation. Notably, the green NGOs, with whom we worked closely, also benefited in that they obtained their goals using fewer resources and energy. Despite the different strategies, appropriate cooperation between environmental journalists and green NGOs empowers both in their efforts to raise environmental awareness among the public.

Environmental news media organizations and NGO cooperation unifies their unique strengths. These two professional groups can support each other through exchanging information and human resources, as well as sharing insights on public opinion and environmental ideology. In today's China, environmental NGOs are both the main organizing body and driving force in the civic environmental movement. The growing number of diverse NGOs are acting as the explorers and promoters of environmental ethics and values, as well as playing the role of information clearinghouses and idea generators for environmental issues. Therefore, green NGOs are irreplaceable sources of information and support for the environmental news media. Besides obtaining valuable news clues and analytical articles from environmental NGO activists, our editors and journalists often consult with them on questions of environmental politics and culture, as well as issues of green consumption, green products, green labeling, and green architecture.

All news media organizations in China (including those with an environmental focus) function to some extent as the voice of the government. Dramatically different from its counterparts in western countries, the Chinese news media is often depicted as the ears, eyes, and tongue of the government, with the news partially colored and censored to fit the official line. However, in light of the intertwined relationship between the news media and government, environmental journalists may help build a bridge to link green NGOs with the government and other sectors of the society. Such linkages can help green NGOs develop their reputa-

tion, and facilitate their activities.

One particularly striking "Chinese characteristic" of China's environmental sector is that there are many "ambidextrous" environmental advocates—in other words many "greenies" are both environmental journalists and NGO activists. I am a perfect example, for I direct a department in a major environmental newspaper and also hold memberships in two green NGOs. Most of the members in Chinese NGOs are volunteers devoting their free time. Clearly, the journalists who choose to actively participate in NGO activities are



Ray Cheung (*Journalism and Media Studies Centre*) relaxes during a break in the journalist workshop on air quality reporting.

motivated to serve the public and not to make personal gain. Moreover, a mature journalist active as a volunteer in an NGO will not give up his or her independent judgment in reporting. In fact, it is not uncommon that journalists raise sharp criticism towards the NGOs to which they belong. Journalists are more often common members as opposed to leaders in the NGOs. For example, I used to do administrative work and edit books for the *Friends of Nature*.

Today, environmental journalism is in its nascent stage in comparison to the broader news media in China. Similarly, green NGOs are a relatively new kind of social organization. Chinese environmental journalists and activists support each other, both struggling as their organizations steadily grow. While they stand on different soil, they are bathed in the same sunlight.

Facing a Half-Transformed Society

Liao Yunchang, Reporter, Taiwan Independent Times

As the Taiwanese political system has increasingly democratized, the public in Taiwan has witnessed a growing diversity in news media organizations. The increase in privately run cable networks and the explosion in the use of the Internet have fundamentally changed the previous practice of the news media being the propaganda tool of the government. The growth in

the number of media corporations and Web-based news outlets has broadened the kinds of news coverage in Taiwan, which has allowed a greater diversity of voices to be heard and opened up reporting on previously ignored issues.

This expansion in freedom for the news media has enabled many

and print editorials voicing the concerns of environmentalists and the stories of pollution victims.

While the news media organizations in Taiwan have begun to pay more attention to environmental issues, such reporting is not perfect. In an attempt to balance the coverage and make up for the long-term neglect of environmental organizations, more journalists now try to report on environmental problems and activism.

Despite their willingness to research and report on environmental issues, Taiwanese journalists today still are constrained in their environmental reporting. Today's obstacles stem not from political bans, rather from economic motivation of the news media industry.

Ultimately, news media organizations wish to publish only those opinions acceptable to the newspaper's financial backers and the mainstream political line. In short, the organizations and advertisers that back a news media company ultimately set the tone of the news reported. Not surprisingly, many of the demands that environmental groups make vis-à-vis the business community and the government in Taiwan often conflict with the profit motivation of the news media industry. In light of this pressure to tow the newspaper's line, journalists may not fully report the real opinions or main concerns of environmental NGOs. In addition, environmental reporting is sometimes incomplete because journalists may lack the scientific expertise to understand the environmental issues being debated. Taiwanese journalists reporting on the environment also need to be careful about being biased in their reporting or too shallow in their coverage.

Standing at the dividing line between pollution and a clean environment, with the cross of professional ethics on their back, Taiwanese environmental journalists face a semi-transformed society. Freed from the clasp of authoritarian control, the news media in Taiwan is now confronted with the temptations and challenges of a free market. Clearly, with the new pressures from the corporate (rather than the governmental) powers it is a constant challenge to ensure accurate representation—and interpretation—of environmental news in Taiwan.



Ding Jing from the WWF-China office pitches an environmental story to convince the panel of journalist judges to cover her imaginary NGO's story.

journalists to seek out the previously unheard or weaker voices in the society, which explains why today there is considerably more coverage of environmental campaigns and activities in Taiwanese newspapers than ever before. Before the ending of martial law in 1987, the government limited news media reporting on protests against nuclear power plants and polluting factories. Over the past two decades as Taiwan's political system has opened up, many newspapers have begun to report