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Chinese Society Confronted with Climate Change

HE GANG

At the moment that China signed the Kyoto Protocol at the United Nations on 29 May 1998 (ratification followed on 30 August 2002), most Chinese people knew hardly anything about climate change. Despite the proliferation of government environmental policies during the 1990s⁽¹⁾, Chinese society played absolutely no part in the initiatives for combating climate change. Nevertheless, as Pan Yue, the Chinese Environment Minister, has pointed out, “Without the participation of the public, there can be no protection of the environment.” Mobilising Chinese society to take an active part is all the more important since the fight against climate change will be fought in the area of energy savings: a warning given by the Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, on the occasion of the opening session of the National People’s Congress in March 2007.

As this article will show, the mobilisation of Chinese society in the battle against climate change is still limited; but since the start of the 2000s, with the backing of the media and the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), we have witnessed the launch of numerous initiatives from business circles, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and student associations. Up to now, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) provided for by the Kyoto Protocol has raised the greatest number of debates and initiatives in Chinese society, especially because China has been the greatest beneficiary among developing countries of CDM financial transfers from rich countries. Chinese NGOs, with significant help from international NGOs, have launched several initiatives aimed at informing Chinese opinion and changing the patterns of individual behaviour in the use of energy. Nevertheless, as we shall show in the concluding part of this article, there are still numerous obstacles preventing people from playing an active role in energy conservation.

The commitment by SEPA and the media in the fight against climate change

Three times over, between 2005 and 2007, SEPA whistled up its “environmental storm,” designed to show the full drama of the ecological problems faced by the Chinese people and its economy. Yet, alerting public opinion is not enough. Confronted by the severe extent of damage to the environment, most people feel powerless. Thus, the mobili-

sation of public opinion seems an essential element in introducing reforms aimed at promoting sustainable development. By organising the “public hearing of the *Yuanmingyuan*”, SEPA sought to complete its action of information and mobilisation with the proposal for “provisional solutions for engaging public opinion on questions relating to the environment.”

The media also played a far from negligible role. A search based on the key words “climate change” in the archives of the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) elicited no fewer than 525 replies, mainly articles on the conclusions of scientific research and international conferences. Further searches through the archives of the big Chinese dailies, over the period 2000-2007⁽²⁾, turned up 3,315 documents dealing with subjects directly related to climate change. Nevertheless, Guo Peiyuan, the CEO of the network Corporate Social Responsibility and Investments considers that it is mainly “factual reports that are favoured”.

In response to the growing interest of the international community in this subject, and coinciding with the publication of

1. In 1990, under the aegis of the State Council committee responsible for environmental protection, the Chinese government created the National Co-ordination Committee on Climate Change. In 1998, the government also put in place a Co-ordination Commission for Measures against Climate Change, bringing together a Committee for Development and Reform, the Ministry of Science and Technology, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 17 other ministries and committees. This Commission set in train numerous projects of research, regulation and co-ordination aimed at combating climate change.
2. Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure. <http://ckrd166.cnki.net/Grid20/Navigator.aspx?ID=3>

Environment protection activists in front of the Consulate General of the USA, Hong Kong

the national report evaluating climate change in China, as well as the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), China has, between November 2006 and the present day, saw its richest harvest of published reports. At the same time, with scientific research work and international co-operation, we are today witnessing a chain reaction between several links: these are, "the government that guides, the media that mobilise and public opinion that commits itself." This chain reaction produces a snowball effect in the awakening of public conscience and public commitment.

Nevertheless, Professor C S Kiang, the Chairman of the Peking University Environment Fund, basing himself on already existing reports, asserts: "At the present time, China is discussing the impact of global climatic upheavals on its own situation, rather than the impact of China on the global climate." He considers: "We should change this, because forgetting the effect that China's development has on the world will make more difficult all communication with the West." The question of climate change derives from common responsibility between developed countries and developing countries. China must take more of an initiative in shouldering its responsibility on a world scale, to win the recognition and the support of the international community.

The CDM as a catalyst for ecological action

In the first quarter of 2007, China has already approved 344 projects within the framework of the CDM⁽³⁾. The dazzling speed at which the CDM is developing in China will lead not only to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but also give significant impetus to growing public awareness of the problem of climate change. Lu Xuedu, a CDM expert, considers that the latter:

is essential to the forming of public opinion, and especially in business circles, about protecting the environment. As the CDM process advances, the theme of climate change is gradually penetrating the collective consciousness.

Office of National Co-ordination Committee on Climate Change organises training sessions two or three times a year to build up a reservoir of expertise in the management of the CDM. The Commission has already published several books such as *The Clean Development Mechanism in China*. In the course of this information process, and following the commitment of researchers, enterprises and officials, the CDM — once a term known only to negotiators — has become an essential field of research and a business opportunity.

3. China Climate Change Info-Net, <http://www.ccchina.gov.cn/en/index.asp>

nity. Li Liyan, officer of the Office of National Co-ordination Committee on Climate Change, testifies that, "At the very beginning, no one knew what we were doing; we had to devote all our efforts to communication, to setting up a reservoir of expertise, to training; so that, gradually, everyone came to understand what the CDM was." Thanks to the profits generated by CDM projects, and to their practical and beneficial effects on the public, the CDM has encouraged many people to pay greater attention to climate change and to put their shoulders to the wheel. This development is in part an answer to the criticism addressed to China in a recent article in the *New York Times*⁽⁴⁾, which maintained that the CDM projects invested in China would represent a heavy expense for the international community. Lu Xuedu sees it differently, asserting:

This is a wrong view of China. The objective figures on these emission reductions are far higher than the funding received through CDM applications. ... It is of immense benefit to the world that China's economy should be based on low consumption of coal and sustainable development.

Maintaining international co-operation

In the *Bulletin on Chinese Development*, Fu Tao explains that China has seen the appearance of two sorts of NGO in the ecological field: those created from above and others created from below known as *caogen*⁽⁵⁾. The first type comprises official bodies founded by the government. The second is organised like a "non-profit-making lobby," defending the public good; it speaks for the elite and also for all those people who are aware of the imminent disaster and consider themselves citizens. Furthermore, two forces have emerged in the climate change field, one from outside born of international co-operation, and the other from within based on the expansion of ecological organisations and on increasing use of the Internet.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) signed an agreement, early in 2001, the Canada-China Cooperation in Climate Change Project (C5), which includes significant financial support. The programme's ultimate objective is to introduce to China the advanced methods applied in Canada, along with Canada's experience in the field of climate change, to help China confront the various aspects of the problem. The funding granted under the programme amount to Can\$6 million (about 3.5 million yuan). The Programme focuses on citizens' awareness and on communication, on broadcasting information nationwide, on research into ways of adapting to climate change and its consequences, and on the CDM.

Jia Feng, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Environmental Education and Communication (the Centre), reports that as early as 2002 the Centre and the Canadian Environment Ministry started talks on climate change. The negotiations had, among other things, entrusted to the Centre the responsibility for applying those clauses in the C5 Project bearing on public education and the broadcasting of information. Public opinion surveys, television documentaries on climate change, public information campaigns and guidance pamphlets distributed by the state are the main provisions of the Programme.

In addition, there are different agreements on climate change linking China with the United Kingdom, Europe and France, at various levels. The deal with France requires strong support for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the launching of the CDM programme in four provinces in the south-west of China. In international programmes, co-operation includes training sessions, research seminars, observation studies, short-term attachments, technological support, planned collaboration and experimental research. The creation and development of international co-operation programmes has brought about the formation of a significant group of experts and officials in China, while building up exchanges and co-operation between all sides in the field of sustainable development and climate change.

Recently, the Chinese Science and Technology Exchange Center—part of the Ministry of Science and Technology—has launched, in partnership with the British Council China, the campaign known as "Climate Cool"⁽⁶⁾. Their aim is to raise awareness of climate change and encourage participants to take individual action to reduce the impact of climate change, by organising activities between 2007 and 2009: research and study classes designed for media journalists, to help them with their reports on climate change; promoting journalistic publications on the question, in Chinese and English; popular education projects and presentations on the problem by youth leaders; surveys on sustainable consumption and on the environment market; and programmes for the youth action in tackling climate change.

For Chinese NGOs, their international counterparts are the spearhead for climate change activities in China. Greenpeace, which opened its Hong Kong branch in 1997, as well as a liai-

4. "Outsize Profits, and Questions, in Effort to Cut Warming Gases," in *New York Times*, 21 December 2006

5. Chinese translation of the English term "grassroot".

6. Climate Cool, <http://www.britishcouncil.org.cn/climatecool/en/index.html>

A Greenpeace activist protesting against climate change in Beijing

son office in Beijing, has organised five big action programmes in China, one of which is called Stop Climate Change and Develop Renewable Energy⁽⁷⁾. WWF China has also launched a whole series of lobbying activities, together with information and education campaigns. The WWF has placed the issues of climatic change and energy at the centre of its programme for China⁽⁸⁾. On the launch of the China-Dialogue⁽⁹⁾ in 2006, bilingual articles, some very critical of the Chinese position, quickly acquired influence and exerted pressure on public opinion. The entry of these international NGOs, because of their multiple contacts and their vast networks on the global level, combined with their comparatively greater capacity for bringing in funding, organising demonstrations and launching information campaigns, has spurred on public opinion and even succeeded in influencing the Chinese government on some issues relevant to its international negotiations.

placed on the website of the China Development Brief⁽¹¹⁾, 15 NGOs out of 178, listed according to their fields of activity, have included among their concerns the question of climate change. Of these, most prominent are GONGOs⁽¹²⁾ such as the China Environmental Protection Foundation (CEPF) and the All China Environment Federation. All these organisations or associations combine their activities relating to climate change with other tasks devoted to the protection of the environment: they rarely treat the problem as a separate issue.

A few initiatives have been launched in recent years by the NGOs on the question of climate change. In 2005, the “26 Degrees Campaign” was promoted in the city of Beijing. The alarm signal that it set off matched the impact of “Switch off everything for five minutes!” in cities like Paris.

Timid expansion by Chinese environmental NGOs

According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, by the end of 2006 there were 346,000⁽¹⁰⁾ Chinese NGOs. To this day, not one NGO specialising in climate change has been formed. According to the list of environmental NGOs

7. Greenpeace Climate Project, <http://www.greenpeace.org/china/en/campaigns/stop-climate-change>
8. World Wild Fund, <http://www.wwfchina.org/english/loca.php?loca=96>
9. China Dialogue, www.chinadialogue.net
10. “Chinese NGOs Increase to 346,000”, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/news/198832.htm>
11. <http://www.greengo.cn>
12. Government Operated Non-Governmental Organisations

According to some estimates, if all the air conditioning in Beijing's buildings were set to 26°C, the consumption of electricity could be reduced this summer by at least 300 million kilowatts an hour, lowering the required output of electrical power by around 10%, which would in turn allow savings of 15 million yuan. In terms of environmental protection, that would be reflected in emission reductions of 1,200 tons of SO₂ and 250,000 tons of CO₂. The Director of Global Village of Beijing, Liao Xiaoyi, was behind another initiative: she ordered the distribution of a commitment booklet on energy consumption in residential districts, to educate public opinion on sustainable energy sources. The booklet is made up of 12 cards printed on recyclable paper, each with a printed message: 12 cards for 12 things people can do. The messages are easy to understand, recommending different ways of saving energy: 18°C in winter, 26°C in summer, cut down on air conditioning, change your bulbs, take the stairs, no appliances left on standby, travel on two wheels, use public transport, reduce emissions, ease up on your fuel consumption, buy green electricity, trust organic products. Students have also begun organising a few activities aimed at combating climate change, on the model of the Beijing University CDM Club, the first group of higher education students to take a specific interest in the question. Du Tingting, a co-initiator of the association relates how the students interested in this problem rallied around the slogan, "We must act to change things." One of their plans is to list all emissions of pollutants at the university and to reduce them, so as to create a green campus.

Although the Chinese NGOs are determined to go further, their actions so far are limited to a few isolated schemes despite the public's growing awareness of climate change. This is attributable to a lack of support, human and financial, to structural sociopolitical obstacles affecting the development of all NGOs in China, and to the lack of information technology.

The obstacles to a more significant commitment by Chinese society

The technical complexity of questions relating to climate change

When compared with other environmental subjects, climate change is much more technical, which has demanded greater precision on the part of the media and the NGOs. Each of the four assessment reports by the IPCC is over

300 pages long, based on work by thousands of specialists and goes back through various periods of geological history. NGOs working on the environment have to learn how to digest and synthesise expert analysis.

On 10 March 2007, the British embassy in Beijing organised for the media a training session on climate change. One speaker, the head of the China region of the Science and Development Network, Gu Hepeng, estimated that the Communist Party newspapers had published four times as many articles on climate change as had the financial press. Moreover, while reporting in China is mainly concerned with confirmed and agreed facts, journalists in foreign countries are looking more for controversial subjects. Chinese articles are rarely inspired by examples taken from the domestic scene. Similarly, only 20% of Chinese reports cite Chinese scientists, whereas in foreign countries nearly all reporters quote directly from their own national experts.

In consequence, it is not difficult to understand why insightful reporting on climate change is rarely to be seen, or why the media is clearly lagging behind in scientific expertise and have little talent for popularising scientific matters. The Chinese media has its attention mainly focused on the consequences of extreme climatic conditions, such as the mild winter in Beijing, the Chongqing drought or the Shenyang blizzards. As a matter of preference, they also like to publish conclusions reached in reports, such as the "National Assessment Report on Climatic Change," or the conclusions and proposals of recent Chinese or foreign research. Without underestimating their importance in bringing climate change issues to the attention of the general public, the media's influence is still limited.

Limits to the extent and co-ordination of the NGOs' activities

For the time being, the work of the NGOs is mainly restricted to passing on information or organising debates; but their activities are still devoted to generalised discussion rather than to building networks or launching extensive and co-ordinated campaigns. Work of this kind is essential for real awareness to develop among the Chinese people. Their contribution to holding back climate change will remain negligible unless massive programmes of concerted action are put in place to bring together the different NGOs working in this field.

Furthermore, the Chinese NGOs are often the target of criticism, for "their overflowing enthusiasm, but inadequate competence". Because of structural restrictions of a political

nature, the ecological NGOs face legal limitations, and problems too with raising sufficient funding. Lastly, their long-term dependence on financial help from abroad saps the legitimacy of their efforts to become established on a national basis. At the same time, because of the considerable rise in the number of these organisations, the NGOs working in this one field are, in a sense, impeding each other's efforts to collaborate. Most NGOs are competing for the available funding while working in isolation. This restricted field of activity and lack of resources prevent most Chinese NGOs from attending international conferences; and they find it even harder to influence their own government on climate questions.

When it comes to public opinion, growing numbers of people have some knowledge of the problem of climate change, and even consider that it is a substantial problem. However, when individuals are asked directly in surveys what they might do on their own account to combat climate change, most are evasive or reply with embarrassment, as if the problem did not closely affect them. So some celebrities, such as Zhang Kejia, a well-known journalist with the *China Youth Daily* campaigns in support of individual awareness: she asks people "to calculate their own emissions of CO₂ and to assess intuitively and easily their own influence on climate change, and then to opt for a way of life and a job showing more respect for the environment."

Citizens' networks and community action: the way ahead

The most extensive online network in the field of climate change, the Climate Action Network (CAN), is a grouping of more than 300 environmental organisations representing eight large regions of the planet. It concentrates its efforts on bringing down temperatures and adapting to climatic change, encourages action by governments and individuals and places anthropogenic climate change within the field of ecologically sustainable development. It contributes to harmonising information exchanges on climate measures taken at international, national or regional levels and on the problems encountered; it explains the options and the positions and policies adopted; it works for greater co-operation; and it promotes the campaigns by NGOs aiming to fight climate change. Because of its powerful network, CAN has the power to lead and integrate in the field of climate change; it can mobilise tens of thousands of people for demonstrations; it can influence the progress of negotiations; and it can even designate which cars producing the lowest emissions of CO₂

are the most environmentally friendly. At the present time, China too has its own union-like Salon for Environmental Journalists on the Environment, journalists specialising in energy and the environment, conferences on co-operation between student environmental organisations and other seminars on the environment hosted by students from around the world, and networks linking federations and forums. A few contacts have been developed with foreign networks. However, these organisations hardly communicate with each other, and sometimes even quarrel with one another. No mechanism for exchanging and sharing information has yet been set up in China and no effective campaigning organisation has really emerged yet. This brought the China Climate Action Network (CCAN) into existence. It has 27 members from 15 organisations, and its vision is to support the network member on promoting the public on climate protection, a network modelled on CAN would enable China to confront the question of climate change from a more stable footing.

Alongside the development of networks, strengthening the role of the media and spreading the public's awareness of the problem of climate change: these are the essential starting-points for future social action. Liang Ruoqiao, communications head at the Greenpeace office in Beijing, stresses the importance of training the media. She reminds us that journalists are "the fourth estate," and the most effective educators of public opinion. The film made by Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, illustrates how the media can play a leading role in informing the population on questions of climate change. At the educational level, the textbooks at primary and secondary schools and the syllabuses taught in higher education will also have to find extra space for the subject of climate change.

Lastly, community action promoted by the NGOs must continue to develop. Just like the 26 Degrees Campaign launched in 2005 or the one promoted by the CDM Club at Beijing University, called Green Campus Initiative. Community action stimulates public participation and plays a powerful educational role among the general public. Yet, the government too needs to be involved, to guarantee a more favourable environment for the development of this kind of action. •

• Revised by Jean-François Huchet, translated by Philip Liddell