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# Beyond Localized Environmental Contention: Horizontal and Vertical Diffusion in a Chinese Anti-Incinerator Campaign

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## ABSTRACT

Environmental contention is mounting all across China. In particular, protests against environmentally hazardous construction projects have become a frequent phenomenon, spreading well beyond China's major cities. While these protests are gaining academic attention, they have mostly been analysed as separate phenomena in isolation from each other. Moreover, such grievance-based environmental contention has largely been investigated separately from 'environmentalist' activism underpinned by environmental organizations and broader environmental concerns. Yet recent protests against the construction of facilities such as waste incinerators and industrial facilities reveal the emergence of linkages and diffusion processes between cases and actors that challenge depictions of Chinese environmental contention as a necessarily purely localized and parochial affair. This article examines this new development in Chinese environmental activism through a detailed case study of an anti-incinerator campaign centred on a village in Hebei Province. It shows how linkages emerged horizontally between local residents and community activists involved in anti-incinerator campaigns elsewhere, and vertically between villagers and members of China's nascent 'no burn' community, a group of actors highly critical of waste incineration in China. This article concludes that both types of linkages were crucial for the development and success of the villagers' campaign. Although the opportunity for upward scale-shift based on active intra-community collaboration remains highly constrained, vertical ties and non-relational horizontal linkages ensure that the impact of environmental campaigns reaches beyond the immediate localities in which they occur.

## Introduction

During the past decade, environmental activism in China has undergone significant change. Pollution victims and grassroots communities have become increasingly outspoken in demanding a clean living environment, and have pursued this through a diverse claims-making repertoire ranging from petitioning and environmental litigation to more disruptive protests and sit-ins.<sup>1</sup> In urban areas, large-scale

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<sup>1</sup>Anna Lora-Wainwright, 'Introduction. Dying for Development: Pollution, Illness and the Limits of Citizens' Agency in China', *The China Quarterly* 214, (2013), pp. 243–254; Melinda Herrold-Menzies, 'Peasant Resistance Against Nature Reserves', in *Reclaiming Chinese Society. The New Social Activism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), ch. 5, pp. 83–98; Yanhua Deng and Guobin Yang, 'Pollution and Protest in China: Environmental Mobilization in Context', *The China Quarterly* 214, (2013), pp. 321–336; H. Christoph Steinhardt and Fengshi Wu, 'In the Name of the Public: Environmental Protest and the Changing Landscape of Popular Contention in China', *The China Journal* 75(1), (2016), pp. 61–82.

protests against environmentally hazardous facilities have become commonplace.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, advances in Chinese environmental law and a growing legal consciousness have resulted in local communities and environmental organizations turning to lawyers and legal organizations for support.<sup>3</sup> In light of the knowledge-dependent and highly contested environmental risks characteristic of modern societies,<sup>4</sup> experts have also become important players in the environmental arena.<sup>5</sup> And environmental journalists continue to play important roles in exposing pollution and working closely with environmental groups.<sup>6</sup> China's green sphere, therefore, increasingly represents a complex network of actors that go far beyond the environmental organizations long regarded as the core of environmental activism in China.

In Western societies, linkages and networks between diverse actors make up and drive environmental movements. Connections between grievance-driven affected communities and environmental organizations were key for the emergence and development of local contentious struggles and for their 'scaling-up' into broader environmental movements.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, linkages that developed between different affected communities helped produce 'protest waves' and 'cycles of contention' in Western societies.<sup>8</sup> Yet the processes through which localized campaigns transcend local arenas and form larger movements remain poorly understood.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly so in illiberal political regimes where the dynamics of contention widely diverge from those observed in democratic contexts.<sup>10</sup>

In China, connections between different actor groups in the environmental arena have received little academic attention. Chinese environmental activism literature has thus far focused either on the activities of 'embedded' environmental organizations<sup>11</sup> or, more recently, on local grievance-based contention.<sup>12</sup> Both aspects have, however, been investigated as largely separate facets of China's green activism. This is partly due to the observation that Chinese environmental organizations shun engagements at

<sup>2</sup>Steinhardt and Wu, 'In the Name of the Public'; Thomas Johnson, 'The Politics of Waste Incineration in Beijing: The Limits of a Top-Down Approach?', *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 15(1), (2013), pp. 109–128; Xiaoyi Sun, Ronggui Huang and Ngai-Ming Yip, 'Political Contexts and Environmental Forces Linking Up: A Case Study of Anti-PX Contention in Kunming', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(106), (2017), pp. xxxxx; Zi Zhu, 'Backfired Government Action and the Spillover Effect of Contention: A Case Study of the Anti-PX Protest in Maoming, China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(106), (2017), pp. xxxxx.

<sup>3</sup>Rachel E. Stern, *Environmental Litigation in China: A Study in Political Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Xing Ying, 'Barefoot Lawyers and Rural Conflicts', in *Reclaiming Chinese Society. The New Social Activism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), ch. 4, pp. 64–82.

<sup>4</sup>Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin van Rooij, 'The People vs. Pollution: Understanding Citizen Action Against Pollution in China', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(63), (2010), pp. 55–77; Anna Lora-Wainwright, 'The Inadequate Life: Rural Industrial Pollution and Lay Epidemiology in China', *The China Quarterly* 214, (2013), pp. 302–320; Jennifer Holdaway, 'Environment and Health in China: An Introduction to an Emerging Research Field', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(63), (2010), pp. 1–22.

<sup>6</sup>Sam Geall, 'China's Environmental Journalists: A Rainbow Confusion', in *China and the Environment: The Green Revolution* (London: Zed Books, 2013), ch. 1, pp. 15–39.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Rootes, 'Environmental Movements', in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), ch. 26, pp. 608–640; Doug McAdam and Hilary Schaffer Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in Their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–2005* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Edward Walsh, Rex Warland and Douglas Clayton Smith, *Don't Burn It Here: Grassroots Challenges to Trash Incinerators* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Doug McAdam, Doug and Dieter Rucht, 'The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528(1), (1993), pp. 56–74; Sarah Soule, 'Diffusion Processes Within and Across Movements', in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), ch. 13, pp. 294–310; Sidney Tarrow, 'Dynamics of Diffusion: Mechanisms, Institutions, and Scale Shift', in *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 11, pp. 204–219.

<sup>9</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in Their Place*, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup>Maryjane Osa and Kurt Schock, 'A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies', *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 27, (2007), pp. 123–153; Paul D. Almeida, 'Opportunity Organizations and Threat-Induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings', *American Journal of Sociology* 109(2), (2003), pp. 345–400.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Ho and Richard Louis Edmonds (eds), *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of a Social Movement* (London: Routledge, 2008); Lei Xie, *Environmental Activism in China* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Van Rooij, 'The People vs. Pollution'; Lora-Wainwright, 'Introduction. Dying for Development'; Deng and Yang, 'Pollution and Protest in China.'

the local level,<sup>13</sup> whilst local communities are often portrayed as ‘isolated’ from intermediary support<sup>14</sup> and their resistance is generally regarded as locally contained, parochial and disconnected.<sup>15</sup> Studies of environmental contention in China have therefore largely focused on individual cases whilst overlooking linkages and diffusion processes between different affected communities and between pollution victims and ‘embedded’ actors.

This article shows how an increasingly complex network is emerging between various actors within China’s environmental arena, connecting environmentalists with grievance-based activism. To investigate these ties, it develops a conceptual framework to analyse *horizontal and vertical linkages* between environmental actors, their impacts on local contention, and their potential for fostering the scaling up of local struggles. It then applies this to an anti-incinerator campaign centred on Hebei’s Panguanying village. Based on several months of field research and systematic events data analysis, we show how local farmers successfully obstructed the incinerator’s construction with help from Beijing-based intermediaries. These intermediaries, which include environmental organizations, experts and lawyers, are sceptical about the rapid spread of incineration in China, and comprise what we label China’s ‘no-burn’ community. We illustrate how villagers’ *horizontal ties* with other contentious communities and *vertical ties* to the Chinese ‘no-burn’ community played a pivotal role in the development of the campaign. Yet the article also shows that prospects for the ‘scaling up’ of local contention within the Chinese political context remain highly constrained.

## Horizontal and Vertical Linkages and the Diffusion of Contention

Contentious struggles are rarely isolated episodes. Rather, insurgents influence and learn from each other across time and space, something best captured by the notion of ‘diffusion of contention’. Diffusion processes, which broadly refer to ‘the flow of social practices among actors within some larger system’,<sup>16</sup> are central to the emergence and development of “protest waves” or “cycles of contention”.<sup>17</sup> Diffusion is thus an integral part of ‘upward’ scale shift, generally understood as a shift in the scope and scale of contentious issues from the local to regional, national or transnational levels.<sup>18</sup>

Social movement scholars in this vein have largely focused on how tactics and movement frames spread across social movements or geographic spaces, encompassing a behavioural and ideational dimension. They have mapped out the communication channels along which these tactics and ideas have travelled and how they have been adopted or “emulated”.<sup>19</sup> The diffusion of contention concept has therefore mainly been used to highlight what we term *horizontal linkages* between geographically dispersed insurgents.

However, *vertical linkages* are also pivotal in the spread and development of local environmental contention. Whereas *horizontal linkages* refer to diffusion processes occurring between contentious communities, *vertical linkages* connect affected communities with supra-local ‘environmentalist’ organizations

<sup>13</sup>Ho and Edmonds, *China’s Embedded Activism*.

<sup>14</sup>Van Rooij, ‘The People vs. Pollution’.

<sup>15</sup>Yongshun Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>Soule, ‘Diffusion Processes Within and Across Movements’, p. 295. are central to the emergence and development of ‘protest waves’ or ‘cycles of contention’

<sup>17</sup>McAdam and Rucht, ‘The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas’; Doug McAdam, ‘“Initiator” and “Spin-off” Movements: Diffusion Processes in Protest Cycles’, in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 217–239; Tarrow, ‘Dynamics of Diffusion’; Mark Traugott, ‘Recurrent Patterns of Collective Action’, in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1–14

<sup>18</sup>Doug McAdam, Hilary Schaffer Boudet, Jennifer Davis, Ryan J. Orr, W. Richard Scott and Raymond E. Levitt, ‘“Site Fights”: Explaining Opposition to Pipeline Projects in the Developing World’, *Sociological Forum* 25(3), (2010), pp. 401–427.

<sup>19</sup>Rebecca Kolins Givan, Kenneth M. Roberts and Sarah A. Soule, ‘Introduction: The Dimensions of Diffusion’, in *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 1, pp. 1–15; Soule, ‘Diffusion Processes Within and Across Movements’; Tarrow, ‘Dynamics of Diffusion’.

and actors. Although local community concerns often clash with environmentalists' priorities,<sup>20</sup> they have nonetheless frequently found common ground for collaborative action.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, experts, lawyers and other individuals have provided multifaceted assistance to contentious local communities, ranging from information provision to more active local engagement.<sup>22</sup> Van Rooij terms this group 'intermediaries'.<sup>23</sup> An encompassing analytical framework of how linkages between different actors impact environmental contention must therefore incorporate both horizontal *and* vertical ties.

The study of the diffusion of contention encompasses three aspects. First, *channels of diffusion* are the pathways along which transmission occurs. Here, scholars distinguish relational from non-relational channels.<sup>24</sup> *Relational channels* transmit information through node-to-node interpersonal ties or networks, encompassing face-to-face interactions and communication across space and time using communications technology. Alternatively, diffusion can also occur via *non-relational channels*, most notably through mass media and the Internet.<sup>25</sup> The former are particularly important in authoritarian regimes, where informal network ties 'substitute both for organizations and the mass media' in the dissemination of uncensored information.<sup>26</sup>

Second, scholars are concerned with the *contents of diffusion*, which essentially boils down to *information*.<sup>27</sup> Information is central to environmental contention, where "the issues that ultimately motivate these disputes are initially far more ambiguous and uncertain than is true for rights movements".<sup>28</sup> The interpretive processes by which affected actors try to understand their situations are heavily dependent on knowledge, information and expertise. Diffusion processes can be crucial in disseminating trusted information including evidence and data.<sup>29</sup> Intermediaries have been pivotal in providing local communities with (publicly inaccessible) *information* about prevalent or pending risks, expertise needed for taking action, and by framing environmental issues in a way that 'legitimiz[es] local concerns and politicize[s] local perspectives'.<sup>30</sup> Both horizontal and vertical linkages can also offer broader issue interpretations, frames and environmental concepts employed by regional, national or transnational movements that may be adapted to the local context.<sup>31</sup> Here, intermediaries often play the role of 'translating' information from one context to another.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>20</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place*, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup>Christopher Rootes, 'Acting Locally: The Character, Contexts and Significance of Local Environmental Mobilisations', *Environmental Politics* 16(5), (2007), pp. 722–741, p. 725.

<sup>22</sup>Van Rooij, 'The People vs. Pollution'; Sabrina McCormick, *Mobilizing Science: Movements, Participation, and the Remaking of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Walsh et al., *Don't Burn it Here*; Setsuko Matsuzawa, 'Citizen Environmental Activism in China: Legitimacy, Alliances, and Rights-Based Discourses', *ASIANetwork Exchange* 19(2), (2012), pp. 81–91.

<sup>23</sup>See Note 14.

<sup>24</sup>Givan et al., 'Introduction: The Dimensions of Diffusion'; Pamela Oliver and Daniel Myers, 'Networks, Diffusion, and Cycles of Collective Action', in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 8, pp. 173–203; Soule, 'Diffusion Processes Within and Across Movements'.

<sup>25</sup>As a third pathway of diffusion, the literature outlines '*mediated diffusion*' or brokerage, i.e. diffusion based on the engagement of brokers – third parties that deliberately 'connect people who would not have otherwise met' (Tarrow 'Dynamics of Diffusion', p. 209). In this paper, brokerage is not conceptualized as a separate pathway of diffusion but as an intermediary mechanism as outlined below.

<sup>26</sup>Maryjane Osa, 'Networks in Opposition: Linking Organizations Through Activists in the Polish People's Republic', in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 4, pp. 77–104, p. 78; see also Carsten T. Vala and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Recruitment to Protestant House Churches', in *Popular Protest in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), ch. 5, pp. 108–125.

<sup>27</sup>Oliver and Myers, 'Networks, Diffusion, and Cycles of Collective Action'. Information is central to environmental contention, where 'the issues that ultimately motivate these disputes are initially far more ambiguous and uncertain than is true for rights movements'.

<sup>28</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place*, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup>Frank Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); McCormick, *Mobilizing Science*; Lora-Wainwright, 'The Inadequate Life'; Robert Futrell, 'Framing Processes, Cognitive Liberation, and NIMBY Protest in the U.S. Chemical-Weapons Disposal Conflict', *Sociological Inquiry* 73(3), (2003), pp. 359–386; Sylvia Noble Tesh, *Uncertain Hazards: Environmental Activists and Scientific Proof* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup>McCormick, *Mobilizing Science*, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup>Kate Burningham and Martin O'Brien, 'Global Environmental Values and Local Contexts of Action', *Sociology* 28(4), (1994), pp. 913–932.

<sup>32</sup>Paul F. Steinberg, *Environmental Leadership in Developing Countries: Transnational Relations and Biodiversity Policy in Costa Rica and Bolivia* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001).

However, beyond information flows, intermediaries have also supported local communities with more *manifest resources*, including financial or material resources and training.<sup>33</sup> They sometimes represent affected populations by advocating their claims and issue frames.<sup>34</sup> Intermediaries can also facilitate access to justice through legal assistance and by gathering evidence related to, for example, pollution or procedural irregularities. They can also provide access to other intermediaries.<sup>35</sup> While these functions can also be performed through horizontal linkages, they are largely attributed to vertical ties. Taken together, *the contents transmitted via horizontal and vertical linkages thus encompass both information flows and the sharing of more tangible resources.*

Finally, scholars have examined the *effects of diffusion*. Five core mechanisms explain how information transmitted via horizontal and vertical linkages may impact local environmental contention. First, external information and 'cognitive cues' regarding prevalent or potential risks may *impact the adopters' awareness process* by facilitating the emergence of grievances, blame attribution, and cognitive justification for resistance.<sup>36</sup> Second, information about contentious action in other localities and the authorities' reactions may *change the adopting actors' perceptions of threat and opportunity*, which may influence both the onset and mode of action. Particularly in authoritarian regimes, such knowledge can be pivotal in mobilizing contention since it alters the adopting actors' perceptions of what is politically feasible.<sup>37</sup> Third, information flows may affect 'identity formation' – activists in one locale may identify with contenders elsewhere, thus forming broader 'imagined communities'.<sup>38</sup> Fourth, information flows between communities may impact the *resource structure* of the adopting community, thus facilitating the mobilization and organization of local contention.<sup>39</sup> Horizontal and vertical linkages may thus help fill resource-gaps highly relevant for taking action, particularly for resource-poor communities. And finally, experts and other authoritative intermediaries are crucial in '*certifying*' information. Information needs to be validated to attain credibility both within affected communities ('internal certification') and in the eyes of the broader public and other potential sympathizers ('external certification') since environmental and health-related contention is heavily dependent on 'neutral experts' or influential public figures to interpret the issues at stake in a credible manner.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, intermediaries can further foster horizontal linkages by 'brokering' communication and mutual recognition between otherwise largely isolated groups.<sup>41</sup> The establishment of horizontal linkages between different communities in this way may thus impact local environmental contention via the above mechanisms. While brokerage roles are generally attributed to intermediaries, they may also be performed by community actors who connect previously unconnected sites or social groups.

<sup>33</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place*, p. 120; McCormick, *Mobilizing Science*, pp. 63–69; Walsh et al., *Don't Burn it Here*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>34</sup>Matsuzawa, 'Citizen Environmental Activism in China'; McCormick, *Mobilizing Science*.

<sup>35</sup>Van Rooij, 'The People vs. Pollution'; Herrold-Menzies, 'Peasant Resistance Against Nature Reserves'; Lei Xie, 'China's Environmental Activism in the Age of Globalization', *Asian Politics & Policy* 3(2), (2011), pp. 207–224; Guobin Yang, 'Civic Environmentalism', in *Reclaiming Chinese Society. The New Social Activism* (London: Routledge, 2010), ch. 7, pp. 119–139

<sup>36</sup>William Felstiner, Richard L. Abel and Austin Sarat, 'The Emergence and Transformation of Disputes: Naming, Blaming, Claiming', *Law & Society Review* 15(3–4), (1980), pp. 631–654; Futrell, 'Framing Processes'; Van Rooij, 'The People vs. Pollution'.

<sup>37</sup>Susanne Lohmann, 'The Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91', *World Politics* 47(1), (1994), pp. 42–101; Daniel Myers, 'Collective Action, Social Movement Theory and Authoritarian Regimes', *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 15(3), (2010), pp. 289–321; Osa, 'Networks in Opposition'; Osa and Schock, 'A Long, Hard Slog'.

<sup>38</sup>Osa, 'Networks in Opposition', pp. 78–79; Soule, 'Diffusion Processes Within and Across Movements', p. 296; Steinhart and Wu, 'In the Name of the Public'.

<sup>39</sup>McAdam et al., "'Site Fights'".

<sup>40</sup>Fischer, *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment*; McCormick, *Mobilizing Science*; Tesh, *Uncertain Hazards*.

<sup>41</sup>Mario Diani, "'Leaders' or Brokers? Positions and Influence in Social Movement Networks", in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ch. 5, pp. 105–122



Together, therefore, horizontal and vertical linkages may impact local environmental contention through five core mechanisms that support the mobilization and organization of action. We now apply this framework to the Panguanying anti-incinerator campaign, which began in 2009.

### **Making the Most of External Linkages: The Case of Hebei's Panguanying Village**

Panguanying village (潘官营村, *Panguanying cun*) houses around 1,800 residents. It is located in Liushouying town (留守营镇, *Liushouying zhen*) of Funing county (阜宁县, *Funing xian*) in the Qinhuangdao city area (秦皇岛市, *Qinhuangdao shi*). In this section, the Panguanying villagers' ties with other contentious communities and intermediaries will be outlined within the context of the unfolding 'anti-incinerator campaign'.

#### **First Stages of Awareness and the Onset of Action: Land Concerns and Procedural Flaws**

On 16 April 2009, a villager surnamed Pan noticed local cadres encircling collective village farmland tenured by several families in Panguanying and a neighbouring village. Upon inquiring, he discovered local government plans to build a waste incinerator on this site just a few hundred metres away from Panguanying.<sup>42</sup> That evening, a small crowd of villagers confronted the village head about the sale of collective land without their prior knowledge. However, the village head referred to orders from higher levels, cautioned farmer Pan not to make trouble, and told the villagers to contact relevant higher-level authorities to voice concern.<sup>43</sup>

The following day, villagers began to investigate the project details and legality of the land requisitioning, and petitioned higher-level authorities from the town to the provincial level.<sup>44</sup> Farmer Pan gathered a small group of villagers to contest what they insisted was the illegal sale of collective land. They included a knowledgeable elderly farmer, also surnamed Pan (no direct relative of farmer Pan), who became a second key figure in the villagers' struggle.<sup>45</sup> The core group of villagers around the two Pans gradually learned more about the planned project, a Waste-to-Energy (WtE) facility jointly planned by the Qinhuangdao city government and private company Zhejiang Weiming (浙江伟明环保股份有限公司, *Zhejiang weiming huanbao gufen youxian gongsi*). They uncovered several flaws in the project's approval and decision-making process,<sup>46</sup> and demanded that construction be halted and that the land be returned to its original state.<sup>47</sup> By mid-May 2009, however, various government departments involved in the project confirmed its legality. The Hebei Province Environmental Protection Bureau (Hebei EPB) approved the project, upon which construction began.<sup>48</sup> Villagers' continued petitioning efforts remained unanswered until September that year, when the Funing county government bowed to mounting public pressure by temporarily halting construction based on procedural flaws identified by the villagers.<sup>49</sup>

During this initial stage, farmers were primarily angered by the local government's lack of communication with – and 'cheating' of – the villagers, the alleged unlawful requisitioning of collective land, and concern about the improper distribution of compensation funds. As one farmer recalled:

When we started we had no experience. They were taking away our land. We wanted to obstruct this from a land perspective, not let them build [the incinerator]. We have to eat from the land they wanted to claim. So we started to fight.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Interviews PGY 1 4-1-12, 27-7-13 (see appendix for full list of interviews); D\_PGY5 to D\_PGY 7.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.; Interviews PGY 2 4-11-12, 5-11-12.

<sup>44</sup>D\_PGY6, D\_PGY8, D\_PGY9.

<sup>45</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY3 28-7-13.

<sup>46</sup>D\_PGY12 to D\_PGY14.

<sup>47</sup>D\_PGY15.

<sup>48</sup>D\_PGY10, D\_PGY16 to D\_PGY19.

<sup>49</sup>Interview PGY1 27-7-13; D\_PGY\_21.

<sup>50</sup>Interview PGY2 4-11-12.

### **From Land to Pollution: Horizontal Linkages**

Construction resumed in May 2010,<sup>51</sup> bringing new urgency to the villagers' campaign. In preceding months, news about the planned incinerator project had spread. Concerns had been raised by villagers including a teacher who had heard about environmental harm associated with incineration, and by the former head of a local paper mill's environmental department who had previously discounted incineration as an option for handling the mill's waste due to the related risks.<sup>52</sup> Warnings about environmental pollution and health hazards, particularly dioxin-related cancer risks, resonated with villagers. Local industries, including the paper mill, a fertilizer plant, and a slaughterhouse, had already seriously polluted the local environment, and cancer rates in the village had been high for years.<sup>53</sup>

Farmers' concerns deepened after watching a China Central Television (CCTV) special feature on the pros and cons of incineration. With this, a growing national public and media debate about incineration, sparked by growing contention against waste incinerator projects and increasingly outspoken opposition by environmental organizations and experts, reached Panguanying. The CCTV program profiled several national and international experts, including retired Beijing professor Zhao Zhangyuan, frequently cited as the Chinese 'no-burn' community's leading expert. Apart from explicitly linking incineration to dioxins and cancer, the program also documented a recent successful case of public opposition to a proposed waste incinerator in Beijing's Liulitun neighbourhood. Construction there was halted in 2007 after hundreds of local residents protested, and the project was ultimately relocated within the city.

Farmer Pan made CD-ROM copies of the CCTV broadcast and villagers uncovered a plethora of online materials about the Liulitun campaign,<sup>54</sup> most importantly a 40-page page 'opinion booklet' (意见书, *yijianshu*) compiled by the Liulitun campaigners. It included detailed results of residents' lay research regarding incineration and its harms, a critique of alleged procedural irregularities, and a detailed description of their struggle.<sup>55</sup>

These materials became invaluable resources for boosting the Panguanying campaigners' knowledge, and for mobilizing broader support among villagers. With the help of a third man named Pan (again no direct relative) who became another core campaigner, villagers distributed copies of the Liulitun booklet and CD-ROM to Panguanying residents and anyone within a 5 km radius to warn of impending pollution.<sup>56</sup> They collected approximately 1500 villager signatures, and stamps and statements from 37 local village committees expressing opposition to the project.<sup>57</sup> As one leading campaigner recalled:

Liulitun had a major influence on us. [...] We copied the Liulitun materials and also copied the CCTV program on CD-ROM and distributed it to everyone in all the villages around. [...] If I hadn't had these things, the villagers wouldn't have believed me. They weren't clear on whether there would be pollution or not. They don't understand these kinds of things, right? But once they saw these things, ah, that waste plants really cause pollution, it was over, [...] they unanimously opposed it.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Interview PGY2 28-7-13; D\_PGY22; cp. Huage Shang, 'Juji Laji Fenshaochang' ['Sniping Waste Incinerators'], *China Weekly* 21 March 2013, <http://www.chinaweekly.cn/bencandy.php?fid=63&id=6503> (accessed 20 July 2015); 'Qinhuangdao Nongmin Laji Fenshao Zujizhan' ['Qinhuangdao Farmers' War to Block Waste Incineration'], *Phoenix Weekly* 1 March 2011, [http://news.ifeng.com/fhzk/detail\\_2011\\_03/01/4905732\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/fhzk/detail_2011_03/01/4905732_0.shtml) (accessed 17 April 2015).

<sup>52</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12, PGY3 28-7-13; cp. Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'; Da Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Nongmin de Fan Fen Laji Yundong' ['Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'], *Green Sohu* 20 May 2013, <http://green.sohu.com/20130520/n376486520.shtml> (accessed 27 November 2013).

<sup>53</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12; D\_PGY4; cp. Shengke Gao, 'Qinhuangdao Laji Fenshao Xiangmu Zao Dizhi. San Nian Jiangju Hen Nan Dapo' ['Qinhuangdao Waste Incinerator Project Suffers Resistance. Three Year Deadlock Difficult to Break'], *Caijing* 2 July 2012, <http://news.qq.com/a/20120705/000735.htm> (accessed 17 April 2015); Da Mao, 'Jianzheng Caogen Liliang. Zoufang Hebei Funing Xian Jandui Laji Fenshaochang Jianshe Ercun Minji' ['Witnessing Grassroots Power: Record of Visit to Village Opposing Waste Incinerator in Funing County, Hebei'], blogpost on Mao Da's personal Sina blog, 22 October 2012, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_5fbaf32e01015y2t.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5fbaf32e01015y2t.html) (accessed 21 July 2013); Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'.

<sup>54</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12.

<sup>55</sup>D\_PGY24.

<sup>56</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12; cp. Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'.

<sup>57</sup>D\_PGY22.

<sup>58</sup>Interview PGY1 27-7-13.



During these dissemination activities, local officials did not stand idly by.<sup>59</sup> Town and city government officials visited the villages to defend the plant and promised that no pollution would result from the incinerator.<sup>60</sup> However, villagers now possessed critical information from authoritative sources and an alternative cognitive framework with which to critically assess the government's claims. When local officials threatened to charge campaigners with trouble-making and the illegal distribution of leaflets, they countered that distributing an official CCTV program was not illegal, nor was distributing leaflets that they had not written.<sup>61</sup>

Villagers deliberately imitated the Liulitun residents' strategies,<sup>62</sup> and their claims increasingly centred on the project's environmental and health hazards rather than land. A process of frame alignment between Panguanying villagers, their Liulitun counterparts, and the wider 'no-burn' community began to occur. Villagers found a local university student to write their own 'opinion booklet', closely following the Liulitun blueprint.<sup>63</sup> It contended that the siting decision was unlawful due to procedural flaws, the environmental and health threats confronting the approximately 30,000 residents within a 5 km radius, and the facility's siting on a large stretch of farmland. It also criticized the social injustice of exposing rural dwellers to harmful incineration of waste mainly produced by urban residents.<sup>64</sup> Similar to the Liulitun document, villagers' opinion booklet reflected broader concerns and framing employed by incineration-opponents elsewhere, including questioning incineration as a suitable waste treatment strategy.

Villagers also identified themselves alongside other local communities fighting for their rights.<sup>65</sup> The notion of 'rights protection' (维权 *weiquan*), also central to Liulitun residents' self-perception, became a key identity frame for the farmers throughout their campaign.<sup>66</sup> The discourse of *weiquan*, often suffixed with 'campaign' (运动 *yundong*), is frequently employed by the Chinese 'no-burn' community.<sup>67</sup> This notion also featured prominently in the CCTV broadcast.

### **Vertical Linkages: The Role of Intermediaries**

Villagers drew on their newly compiled materials to embark on another round of petitioning in 2010, but to little effect. Frustrated, campaigners sought external help. Upon discovering that Beijing-based environmental lawyer Xia had helped Liulitun residents file an administrative review application, the farmers contacted him for assistance.<sup>68</sup> Xia agreed to help, hoping that this case could set a precedent for environmental litigation and create impact beyond Panguanying.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Phoenix Weekly, 'Qinhuangdao Farmers' War to Block Waste Incineration'; Gao, 'Qinhuangdao Waste Incinerator Project Suffers Resistance'; Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'.

<sup>60</sup>Interview PGY1 27-7-13; Phoenix Weekly, 'Qinhuangdao Farmers' War to Block Waste Incineration'; Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'.

<sup>61</sup>Interview PGY2 27-7-13.

<sup>62</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, 27-7-13, PGY2 27-7-13, 28-7-13.

<sup>63</sup>See Note 57.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>cp. interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12, PGY3 28-7-13.

<sup>67</sup>cp. interviews lawyer Xia 6-11-12; Zhao 8-11-12; NGO NU1 7-11-12; NGO NU3 25-7-13; Mao, 'Witnessing Grassroots Power', Liwen Chen, 'Zhong Suo Qidai de Cunzhang Xuanju Bei Liyi Jiuge de Laji Fenshaochang Jiaoluan' [Public's Long-Awaited Village Head Election Thrown into Waste Incinerator Chaos by Special Interest Entanglements], blogpost on Chen Liwen's personal Sina blog, 30 November 2012, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_9613153701013xma.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_9613153701013xma.html) accessed 7 April 2015; Zhangyuan Zhao, 'Qinhuangdao Fenshao Weiquan Huodong: Zhongguo Jindai Lishishang Gongzhong Canyu Huanbao de Xin Dianxing' ['Qinhuangdao Incineration Rights-Upholding Campaign: A New Model of Environmental Protection Based on Public Participation Unprecedented in Modern Chinese History'], blogpost on Zhao Zhangyuan's personal Sohu blog, 4 July 2012, <http://zhaozhangyuan.blog.sohu.com/> accessed 6 March 2014; Zhangyuan Zhao, 'Fenshao Hunhe Laji Yi Cheng Guojie Laoshu!' ['Mixing Incinerator Waste has Become like a Mouse Crossing the Road!'], blogpost on Zhao Zhangyuan's personal Sohu blog, 31 October 2012, <http://zhaozhangyuan.blog.sohu.com/> (accessed 6 March 2014); Jun Xia, 'Cong Qinhuangdao Xibu Laji Fenshao Fadian Xiangmu Fengbo Kan Weifa Huanping Shenpi de E'guo' ['Looking at the Bad Consequences of Illegal EIA Approval From the Western Qinhuangdao Waste-to-Energy Project Turmoil'], in: *China Waste Information Network Newsletter* 1, 18 July 2011, pp. 7–9.

<sup>68</sup>Interview PGY2 5-11-12; cp. Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'; Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'.

<sup>69</sup>Interview Xia 6-11-12.

On Xia's advice, the farmers filed an administrative review application with the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) and two other provincial-level institutions in August 2010, challenging the Hebei EPB's earlier decision to approve the project due to procedural flaws.<sup>70</sup> The MEP accepted the case in mid-September, and requested written statements from all involved parties, including the Hebei EPB and Zhejiang Weiming, who disputed the charges.<sup>71</sup> To the villagers' dismay, the MEP upheld the Hebei EPB's decision, arguing that the villagers' claims were not sufficiently founded.<sup>72</sup>

During the administrative review process, the MEP had disclosed the written statements to the farmers. In them the Hebei EPB and Zhejiang Weiming referred to an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) conducted in early 2009 by the Chinese Academy of Meteorological Sciences (中国气象科学研究院, *Zhongguo qixiang kexue yanjiuyuan*, CAMS). They claimed that, consistent with the law, this EIA had been publicized locally and that public opinion had been solicited through the distribution of 100 questionnaires, with the vast majority of respondents supporting the project.<sup>73</sup> This agitated the villagers, who suspected foul-play.<sup>74</sup> Their suspicions were strengthened by assessments of intermediaries from Beijing who had become involved in the case. With help from Beijing-based environmental organization Nature University, lawyer Xia introduced villagers to Zhao Zhangyuan when they visited Beijing. Zhao then visited Panguanying in November 2010 to investigate,<sup>75</sup> concluding that the location was unsuitable for constructing an incinerator and that the entire EIA was severely flawed.<sup>76</sup> Zhao briefed villagers on the risks of incineration and discussed anti-incineration struggles in other localities.<sup>77</sup>

Lawyer Xia also introduced the villagers to members of Nature University.<sup>78</sup> They provided the villagers with information about incineration, experiences of other affected communities, and possible courses of action. Nature University members strongly urged the farmers to pursue a legal course of action and avoid violent clashes with the state.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, organization staff raised the case's profile by attracting media attention. When the Pans visited Beijing, they introduced their case at one of Nature University's regular public lectures, with several media representatives in attendance.<sup>80</sup> Nature University staff also disseminated the villagers' claims via their personal networks and social media.<sup>81</sup> During this phase, however, media attention remained limited.

### ***A First Victory: The EIA Fraud and Successful Environmental Litigation***

Armed with new information and intermediary support, in January 2011 villagers launched an administrative lawsuit with a Shijiazhuang court against the Hebei EPB's decision to approve the incinerator.<sup>82</sup> Following Xia's advice, they centred their allegations on the EIA flaws discovered by Professor Zhao.<sup>83</sup> Unexpectedly, this strategy proved successful. During the evidence collection procedures for the lawsuit, and to Xia's great surprise, the Hebei EPB released a wide collection of internal government documents and the full EIA report.<sup>84</sup> This included the 100 public participation questionnaires allegedly

<sup>70</sup>D\_PGY12 to D\_PGY14; D\_PGY27 to D\_PGY29; Interviews Xia 6-11-12, 30-7-13; Xia, *Looking at the Bad Consequences of Illegal EIA Approval from the Western Qinhuangdao Waste-to-Energy Project Turmoil!*

<sup>71</sup>D\_PGY2, D\_PGY30 to D\_PGY32.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*; D\_PGY10.

<sup>73</sup>D\_PGY10, D\_PGY31 to D\_PGY32.

<sup>74</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY 2 5-11-12.

<sup>75</sup>Interviews Zhao 8-11-12, Xia 6-11-12, PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 4-11-12, 27-7-13.

<sup>76</sup>Interviews Zhao 8-11-12, PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12, 27-7-13, NGO NU3 25-7-13; D\_PGY4; Zhao, 'Qinhuangdao Incineration Rights-Upholding Campaign'.

<sup>77</sup>Interviews Zhao 8-11-12, PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12.

<sup>78</sup>Interviews Xia 6-11-12, NGO NU2 18-10-11, NGO NU3 25-7-13, PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*; Interview NGO NU1 7-11-12.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>Interviews NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU2 8-5-13, 1-7-15, NGO NU3 25-7-13.

<sup>82</sup>D\_PGY37, D\_PGY38.

<sup>83</sup>D\_PGY41, D\_PGY42.

<sup>84</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 27-7-13, Xia 6-11-12, 30-7-13.

distributed to villagers, as well as the protocol of a villager representative meeting convened by the village committee in March 2009, where the villagers had allegedly signed in support of the project.<sup>85</sup>

Through these documents, Xia and the villagers received firm proof that the public participation process for the EIA had been forged. They verified that, although participants in the March 2009 meeting had indeed signed a document, they only did so to confirm receipt of a 10 RMB participation fee, and *not* in support of the incinerator.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, visits to villagers whose names and signatures had appeared on the questionnaires yielded written statements from them that they had 'never seen this questionnaire, do not know who signed it, and do not agree with the construction of the incinerator'.<sup>87</sup>

In early March 2011, the Pans presented this evidence to the Shijiazhuang court as evidence. They notified Nature University staff, who wrote a lengthy letter to the MEP (D\_PGY3). They also contacted a *Phoenix Weekly* journalist, who visited Panguanying and wrote a lengthy article about the case.<sup>88</sup> Confronted with fresh evidence, the Hebei EPB ordered an immediate construction halt.<sup>89</sup> Three days before a court hearing scheduled for 30 May it revoked its official approval of the project EIA after discovering that the court would rule in favour of the villagers due to flaws in the EIA process. The EPB ordered another EIA to be conducted, and in the meantime suspended all EIA applications for Qinhuangdao City.<sup>90</sup> Having achieved their aims, the Pans withdrew their lawsuit in early June.<sup>91</sup>

Intermediaries viewed this outcome as a major victory, not only for Panguanying villagers, but also as a precedent for successful national-level environmental litigation against failure to implement the EIA law.<sup>92</sup> Zhao called the Panguanying case a 'new model of environmental protection based on public participation unprecedented in modern Chinese history'.<sup>93</sup> Intermediaries hoped that they could use the Panguanying success to persuade other affected communities to favour legal channels over disruptive and potentially violent actions.<sup>94</sup>

### ***New Battlefronts: Widening NGO Engagement and National-level Issue Campaigns***

The incinerator controversy did not end there, however. First, Nature University staff discovered that Zhejiang Weiming had applied for the project to be granted Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) status in mid-June.<sup>95</sup> Worried that this status would help justify the project's restart, in June 2011 eight Chinese environmental organizations submitted a critical comment on the project to UNFCCC with support from transnational organizations Global Alliance of Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) and CDM Watch. Second, five of these organizations petitioned the MEP in an open letter to bar CAMS from conducting EIAs based on the fraud practised in Panguanying and another site.<sup>96</sup> Although this campaign generated much media attention, it did not produce major responses from the MEP at this time. Third, after the

<sup>85</sup>D\_PGY43, D\_PGY44.

<sup>86</sup>D\_PGY45.

<sup>87</sup>D\_PGY46 to D\_PGY47.

<sup>88</sup>Phoenix Weekly, 'Qinhuangdao Farmers' War to Block Waste Incineration'.

<sup>89</sup>D\_PGY48, D\_PGY49.

<sup>90</sup>D\_PGY42; interview lawyer Xia 30-7-13.

<sup>91</sup>D\_PGY42; interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 4-11-12.

<sup>92</sup>Interviews Xia 30-7-13; Xia, 'Looking at the Bad Consequences of Illegal EIA Approval from the Western Qinhuangdao Waste-to-Energy Project Turmoil'; Zhao, 'Qinhuangdao Incineration Rights-Upholding Campaign'; Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'; Chen, 'Public's Long-Awaited Village Head Election Thrown into Waste Incinerator Chaos by Special Interest Entanglements'; cp. Gao, 'Qinhuangdao Waste Incinerator Project Suffers Resistance'; Phoenix Weekly, 'Qinhuangdao Farmers' War to Block Waste Incineration'.

<sup>93</sup>Zhao, 'Qinhuangdao Incineration Rights-Upholding Campaign'.

<sup>94</sup>Interviews Xia 6-11-12, 30-7-13, NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU3 25-7-13.

<sup>95</sup>D\_PGY11.

<sup>96</sup>FON, 'Huanping Bei Zhi Zuojia. Wu Huanbao Zuzhi Shenqing Quxiao Qikeyuan Zizhi' ['EIA Contains Fakery. Five Environmental Organisations Apply for China Academy of Meteorological Sciences Qualifications to be Cancelled'], post on FON organization website, 21 June 2011, <http://www.fon.org.cn/index.php/Index/cate/id/92> (accessed 6 August 2015); Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'; Linlin Liu, 'Defrauding the Environment', in *Global Times* 17 January 2013, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/756622.shtml> (accessed 12 February 2013); Interviews NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU3 25-7-13, NGO FON1 19-10-12.

MEP announced that it had accepted Zhejiang Weiming's application to conduct an environmental examination as a prerequisite for its stock market entrance, both villagers and environmental organizations petitioned the MEP to deny the application.<sup>97</sup> Again, however, the MEP remained unmoved.<sup>98</sup>

In February 2012, it emerged that Zhejiang Weiming planned to restart construction.<sup>99</sup> In May and June 2012, high-ranking company personnel discussed their plans with Nature University staff and lawyer Xia, and invited them and Professor Zhao to visit one of their incinerators near Shanghai.<sup>100</sup> Nature University took this as a sign that their efforts in Panguanying and elsewhere were being taken seriously. They urged the company to communicate directly with the villagers, whilst also relating villagers' claims and concerns. Although Zhejiang Weiming met with the Pans to explore the prospect of restarting the project, the farmers insisted that a new EIA process must be conducted and that the villagers would oppose the project.<sup>101</sup> Meanwhile, the Pans – supported by lawyer Xia, a Beijing-based law professor, and the China Lawyers Association – launched an administrative redress challenging the MEP's decision to ratify Zhejiang Weiming's IPO application and, after its failure, two successive lawsuits against the MEP. Although these appeals reached the Beijing Municipality Higher People's Court, they were dismissed in September 2012.<sup>102</sup>

### **Back to Local: Running for Village Elections and Growing Media Attention**

Faced with these set-backs and with the possible resumption of the incinerator project, the farmers continued to challenge the legality of the project's land requisition. For this they needed the stamp of the village committee as official proprietor of the requisitioned land. Village head Qiao, an incinerator proponent, had refused to provide this stamp. Villagers believed that, if one of them could be elected village head, they could halt the project once and for all by dismantling the construction site and returning the land to its original agricultural designation.<sup>103</sup>

In late 2011, Qiao had been forced to resign from office by the infuriated villager community. The periodic village election in Panguanying was scheduled for February 2012, with one of the Pans standing for election with broad support among the villagers.<sup>104</sup> Although the election was delayed, and Pan was exposed to pressure from local officials, he continued to stand for election. The struggle in the village had now gone beyond the incinerator project to incorporate broader local political entanglements. During this phase, Nature University staffs' main role became one of protecting the Pans. In September 2012 they visited Panguanying for the first time, and called on the media to report on the upcoming election.<sup>105</sup> Around that time, the MEP was examining several hundred EIA units, and had urged the media to expose EIA-related malpractices.<sup>106</sup> In this context, the Panguanying story was reported by numerous outlets including the *People's Daily*<sup>107</sup> and *Caixin*.<sup>108</sup> The dissemination efforts by Nature University also yielded a steady stream of external visitors to Panguanying including journalists, intermediaries, and researchers, including the researchers of this article.

<sup>97</sup>D\_PGY48, D\_PGY49; Interviews PGY2 5-11-12, NGO NU3 25-7-13, Xia 30-7-13; Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'; Gao, 'Qinhuangdao Waste Incinerator Project Suffers Resistance'.

<sup>98</sup>D\_PGY49.

<sup>99</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 4-11-12; Gao, 'Qinhuangdao Waste Incinerator Project Suffers Resistance'.

<sup>100</sup>Interviews Xia 6-11-12, NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU2 25-7-13.

<sup>101</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 5-11-12.

<sup>102</sup>D\_PGY49, D\_PGY57, D\_PGY59 to D\_PGY61; Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, Xia 6-11-12.

<sup>103</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 5-11-12, PGY3 28-7-13.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.; Linlin Liu, 'Villagers Protest Delayed Election', in *Global Times* 30 November 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/747434.shtml> (accessed 5 December 2012); Liu, 'Defrauding the Environment'; Linlin Liu, 'Hebei Villagers Disrupt Illegal Election', in: *Global Times* 31 December 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/753122.shtml> (accessed 7 January 2013).

<sup>105</sup>Mao, 'Witnessing Grassroots Power'; Interviews NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU2 29-10-12, NGO NU3 25-7-13.

<sup>106</sup>Interviews NGO NU1 7-11-12, NGO NU3 25-7-13.

<sup>107</sup>Yang Liu, 'Huanping Jigou Jing Zheyang Zaojia' ['EIA Unit Actually Engages in this Kind of Forgery'], *People's Daily*, 29 January 2013, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2013-01/29/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20130129\\_4-04.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2013-01/29/nw.D110000renmrb_20130129_4-04.htm) (accessed 12 March 2014).

<sup>108</sup>Zheng Cui, 'Huanbaobu Tongbao Chufa 88 Jia Huanping Jigou' ['Ministry of Environmental Protection Announces Penalties for 88 EIA Units'] *Caixin Magazine*, (8 January 2013), <http://china.caixin.com/2013-01-08/100480553.html> (accessed 21 August 2013); Zheng Cui, 'Niezao 100 ge Huanping Tongyi' [Fabrication of 100 EIA Agreements], *Caixin Magazine*, 8 February 2013, <http://m.magazine.caixin.com/m/2013-02-08/100490909.html?p1>, (accessed 21 August 2013).

At candidate Pan's request, Nature University staff acted as unofficial election observers,<sup>109</sup> arriving on the eve of the election with a journalist friend from the *Global Times*. However, the election descended into chaos after three armed men burst into the polling station and destroyed ballots and voting boxes, before escaping unchallenged.<sup>110</sup> Nature University staff reported on the events via their social media accounts and the *Global Times* journalist penned a story for the paper's English-language edition.<sup>111</sup>

A replacement election the following month was also interrupted and no new village head was elected. Scuffles broke out between villagers, public security forces and town government cadres. Some villagers forced their way into the vote counting room, to discover that election staff had hidden numerous ballot slips in their clothes to distort the results.<sup>112</sup> Several dozen villagers appealed to the Funing county government for a new election, and once again Nature University staff and the *Global Times* journalist reported on the events.<sup>113</sup>

### ***The Aftermath: Coming to an Impasse and Becoming a 'Major Environmental Case'***

Five days after the second failed election, three villagers – including one of the Pans – were summoned to the Funing county public security bureau accused of 'disrupting public order'.<sup>114</sup> Pan, who vehemently denied the charges, immediately contacted Nature University staff.<sup>115</sup> They disseminated the villagers' information via their networks and social media channels, and the *Global Times* journalist wrote another article.<sup>116</sup> According to Pan, these actions helped in having the charges dropped.<sup>117</sup> In mid-January 2013, the Pans petitioned the county and town governments about election problems.<sup>118</sup> The township denied malpractice and announced that, in the absence of a village head, a government working group would be stationed in the village to preserve order.<sup>119</sup>

In mid-August 2013, the town government informed villagers that they were considering dismantling the construction site. As of 2016, no official timeline for doing so has been announced, however.<sup>120</sup> Although the incinerator issue has not been comprehensively resolved, farmers nonetheless felt victorious.<sup>121</sup> Widespread external attention, and the great value attached to the case by intermediaries as a unique case of successful local resistance against EIA fraud positively affected the Pans' self-perception. This change was observable in how they presented their case during the different field visits. In 2012, they focused on the villagers' rightful struggle for a clean environment, transparency regarding the procedures and their right to local political participation.<sup>122</sup> By 2013 their self-perception had broadened beyond their individual struggle. They now portrayed themselves as fighting for social justice, and presented their case as an exemplary case of local environmental contention, which they hoped

<sup>109</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 27-7-13, NGO NU2 26-3-14; Chen, 'Public's Long-Awaited Village Head Election Thrown into Waste Incinerator Chaos by Special Interest Entanglements'.

<sup>110</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY3 28-7-13, NGO NU3 25-7-13; Chen, 'Public's Long-Awaited Village Head Election Thrown into Waste Incinerator Chaos by Special Interest Entanglements'; Liu, 'Villagers Protest Delayed Election'; Liu, 'Defrauding the Environment'; Liu, 'Hebei Villagers Disrupt Illegal Election'.

<sup>111</sup>Chen, 'Public's Long-Awaited Village Head Election Thrown into Waste Incinerator Chaos by Special Interest Entanglements'; Liu, 'Villagers Protest Delayed Election'; Liu, 'Defrauding the Environment'.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.; Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 27-7-13, PGY3 28-7-13, NGO NU3 25-7-13; Mao, 'Mao Da: Qinhuangdao Farmers' Anti Waste Incineration Movement'.

<sup>113</sup>Liu, 'Hebei Villagers Disrupt Illegal Election'.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>See Note 58.

<sup>116</sup>Liu, 'Villagers Protest Delayed Election'.

<sup>117</sup>See Note 58.

<sup>118</sup>D\_PGY62.

<sup>119</sup>D\_PGY63; cp. Shang, 'Sniping Waste Incinerators'.

<sup>120</sup>Interview NGO NU2 1-7-15.

<sup>121</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 27-7-13, PGY3 28-7-13.

<sup>122</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 5-11-12; cp. D\_PGY22.

would have a national impact and encourage also other communities to defend their rights and the environment.<sup>123</sup>

## **Analysis: The Role of Horizontal and Vertical Ties in the Panguanying Villagers' Environmental Contention**

This section analyses the role of horizontal and vertical ties in the Panguanying case. Although they are closely interrelated in how they affected the villagers' contention, we discuss them successively for greater clarity.

### ***The Role of Horizontal Ties***

Villagers' ties with other contentious communities were limited and mainly restricted to non-relational ties. These linkages nonetheless were pivotal in the development of the villagers' resistance, thus demonstrating that horizontal diffusion processes between different localities can impact upon local environmental contention and contribute to the geographic spread of resistance in China. In particular, the Liulitun campaign crucially impacted the Panguanying case. Initially, information concerning the Liulitun campaign reached villagers mainly through the mass media and the internet. Although the majority of villagers lacked the ability to access this information, individuals such as the local teacher and younger relatives of the Pans helped bridge this gap. These non-relational linkages were later complemented by engaged intermediaries who, playing a brokerage role, transmitted information about anti-incineration struggles from other Chinese localities to the Panguanying villagers.

This information was crucial in developing villagers' awareness and shifting their claims and framing from land and corruption to concerns about environmental pollution and health hazards. The transmitted information certified campaign leaders' claims regarding environmental and health hazards posed by the plant. Both the CCTV broadcast and the Liulitun 'opinion booklet' also provided alternative interpretive frames and cognitive cues questioning waste incineration as a panacea for China's waste problem, which, together with information on waste incineration and its risks, enabled them to critically assess government claims.

The materials also fostered frame alignment between the Panguanying villagers, Liulitun residents, and the broader 'no-burn' community. Both the CCTV program and the Liulitun materials helped shift the villagers' contentious identity from centring on lawful land rights to being part of a broader '*weiquan*' community in China. Furthermore, the Liulitun and CCTV materials helped village leaders mobilize support from the wider village community and surrounding village committees. They also shielded farmers from local government pressure and charges of trouble-making.

The Panguanying villagers directly emulated Liulitun residents through their own 'opinion booklet' and through engaging lawyer Xia and his legal strategy. As well as facilitating Panguanying villagers' access to justice, the Liulitun campaign also changed their perceptions of threat and opportunity by instilling belief that citizen resistance can be successful. Similarly, the Liulitun materials also encouraged the village leaders to contact other intermediaries such as Professor Zhao, with important implications for their campaign. As summarized by one of the village leaders:

We drew a lesson from them [Liulitun], we learned from them. We used their strong points to mend our shortcomings. Because they understand everything. So we also drew a lesson from their methods to do this. [...] If it hadn't been for the Liulitun plant issue, we really wouldn't have known [...] from where to start.<sup>124</sup>

However, village campaigners did not establish relational ties with Liulitun residents. They claimed to have learned enough from the online materials and through intermediaries involved in the Liulitun struggle.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, they did not collaborate with villagers from Beijing's Dagong village who also faced EIA fraud at the hands of CAMS. While joint claims regarding the fraud practiced by CAMS in both

<sup>123</sup>Interviews PGY1 27-7-13, PGY2 28-7-13.

<sup>124</sup>Interview PGY1 4-11-12.

<sup>125</sup>Interviews PGY1 4-11-12, PGY2 27-7-13.



Panguanying and Dagong emerged, these were produced by environmental organizations engaged in both cases, not by local communities. Although Nature University introduced the Panguanying campaigners to members of other contentious communities during their visits to the capital, these relational ties were not taken further. This was partly due to the different strategies employed by Beijing homeowners, who largely relied on large-scale 'strolls' to demonstrate their opposition to incinerator projects.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, the village leaders regarded the Gaoantun and Dagong cases as examples of *unsuccessful* local contention (opposition in both cases failed to thwart incinerator projects), thus discouraging active exchange with community members.<sup>127</sup>

### **The Role of Vertical Ties**

Vertical linkages with supra-local members of the Chinese 'no-burn' community were also pivotal in the development of environmental contention in Panguanying. Village campaigners repeatedly highlighted their importance:

All the ones that have donated themselves to the environmental issue, experts, professors, lawyers, the media: Their help was immense. That waste plant, if it hadn't been for these people, we absolutely [...] wouldn't have known what to do. [...] Really, it was only with their help that we could do this.<sup>128</sup>

Zhao Zhangyuan was the first intermediary involved in the Panguanying struggle. He raised villagers' awareness by providing critical information and interpretive frames regarding waste incineration and related risks – first via the non-relational channels provided by the CCTV broadcast and the Liulitun materials, and later in person. Here, Liulitun campaigners, who referred to Zhao in their Opinion Booklet, functioned indirectly as brokers between him and the Panguanying villagers. Zhao's status as renowned professor and waste expert enhanced the farmers' cognitive justification for taking action based on environmental concerns. His pointing out of EIA flaws provided the basis for villagers' further actions, including environmental litigation. Zhao also certified villagers' claims externally through documenting the case via his personal blog and through being cited as an 'expert' in Chinese media reports about the case.

Lawyer Xia also played a crucial role. Based on his professional assessment and his experiences with the Liulitun case, he advised village campaigners to shift the focus of their legal action from the land issue towards environmental litigation based on EIA flaws, thus significantly impacting the villagers' course of action. Apart from providing legal assistance, Xia also brokered connections between villagers and both professor Zhao and members of Nature University. Moreover, similar to Zhao, he published articles and gave lectures on the case, thus disseminating and certifying the villagers' cause externally towards the public and the media.

The third major engaged party was Nature University staff, who played a multifaceted role during the struggle albeit in later stages of the campaign. Initially, it mainly focused on disseminating information regarding the villagers' claims via its online and personal networks and by inviting the villagers to issue-specific meetings in Beijing. The organization brokered ties between the villagers and media representatives as well as with other contentious communities and 'no burn' community members. The steady stream of visitors, including journalists and researchers, initiated by Nature University staff in 2012, helped protect village leaders from repercussions by Party-state officials, and brought their cause to the broader public. Nature University also advocated the villagers' cause in petitions and open letters to the MEP. Together with lawyer Xia, it helped represent villagers in their communication with Zhejiang Weiming. In addition, during their first field visit to Panguanying, members of the organization provided issue-specific knowledge and advice, helped collect evidence related to EIA flaws, and offered specific assistance regarding the organization of action. During the village elections, they served as unofficial election observers and played a protective role.

<sup>126</sup>Johnson, 'The Politics of Waste Incineration in Beijing'.

<sup>127</sup>Interviews PGY1 5-11-12, PGY2 28-7-13; D\_PGY22.

<sup>128</sup>See Note 58.

While other environmental organizations were loosely engaged in the case, their engagement was confined to participating in the above-mentioned advocacy activities, and they did not establish direct relational ties with the villagers.

Whereas horizontal diffusion was mainly based on non-relational ties, vertical linkages between villagers and intermediaries were predicated upon personal interactions. There are several likely reasons for this. First, both villagers and intermediaries had something to gain from collaborating. This was not the case with, for example, Liulitun campaigners who had already succeeded in winning their battle. Second, intermediaries such as Xia, Zhao and various journalists who covered the case were, to some extent, 'embedded' within the party-state. One of their main goals was to use the case as a precedent for advancing better environmental governance practices within the existing one-party system. And third, geographical proximity to Beijing played a role – high speed rail links between Beijing and Beidaihe meant that Panguanying could be reached in approximately three hours from the capital.

### Conclusion: Towards a Broader Movement?

Horizontal and vertical ties have started to connect different actors involved in Chinese anti-incineration contention, affecting the spread and development of environmental contention. The Panguanying case examined in this article is not an isolated example – intermediaries such as Nature University have been involved in multiple local struggles against waste incinerators and other unpopular projects<sup>129</sup> and learning processes between different communities have also been observed in other issue fields.<sup>130</sup> Rather than proceeding along separate tracks, as much of the literature suggests, 'environmentalist' and 'grievance-based' activism in China are increasingly interrelated and can be mutually reinforcing.

To what extent might these emerging linkages bridging environmentalist and grievance-based concerns contribute to an upward scale-shift, namely collaborative action spanning different sites of contention, claims and issue interpretations that reach beyond local grievances, as well as broader collective identities and new organizational forms and alliances? In one sense, the prospects for scaling up appear limited. Horizontal relational linkages between different contentious communities remain severely constrained. Panguanying villagers insisted that they did not reach out directly to similar communities because they saw limited value in doing so. This was likely also related to the pervasive political sensitivity towards cross-regional collective action. As several intermediaries stressed, when it comes to environmental contention, the onus remains firmly on local communities to stand up and fight for their rights.

However, whilst coordinated cooperation based on relational ties between communities remains taboo, cognitive alignment and tactical sharing are harder to control. Panguanying villagers aligned their interpretive frames and claims with other contentious communities and the broader 'no-burn' community, and developed a contentious identity that transcended the village level. This echoes findings from other studies that highlight considerable learning across protesting communities that can access information about other cases through the mass media and internet.<sup>131</sup> Whilst it may be premature to speak of an anti-incinerator *movement* in China, our article adds further empirical support to Steinhardt and Wu's claim that broadened protest constituencies are emerging that contest pollution and bridge community activism with broader policy advocacy goals.<sup>132</sup>

This article also demonstrates how local community resistance rooted in local political issues can significantly enhance national-level actors' struggles (in this case, the no-burn community) for greater awareness about risks associated with waste incineration and for better transparency and proper EIA law implementation. This has also been demonstrated with regards to other issue fields.<sup>133</sup> Two points are worth noting here. First, this process can be mutually reinforcing, benefiting local communities and

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<sup>129</sup>Sun et al., 'Political Contexts and Environmental Forces Linking Up'.

<sup>130</sup>Zhu, 'Backfired Government Action and the Spillover Effect of Contention'.

<sup>131</sup>Zhu, 'Backfired Government Action and the Spillover Effect of Contention'; Steinhardt and Wu, 'In the Name of the Public'.

<sup>132</sup>Steinhardt and Wu, 'In the Name of the Public'.

<sup>133</sup>See Note 129.

supporting environmentalists' cause. The exposure of cases such as Panguanying to a broader audience draws attention to problems that Chinese environmentalists have long been concerned with, such as weak implementation of EIA provisions, limited transparency and public participation, and, more specifically, risks associated with the rapid spread of waste incineration in China. Whereas supra-local organizations have often been viewed as coordinators of collective campaigns involving multiple local-level groups in more liberal settings, the China example shows how disparate community campaigns can strengthen the position of intermediaries such as environmental organizations and contribute to wider issues such as regulatory failures or governance reform. For local communities, intermediary support can offer awareness, protection, publicity, certification and resources such as technical information and legal advice that help them navigate the uncertain terrain of environmental contention in China. And second, vertical ties of the kind examined in this article are largely embedded in Party-state policies that, for example, nominally support public participation and access to environmental information. By encouraging and supporting the channelling of dissent through legal processes (however imperfect they might be),<sup>134</sup> national-level actors arguably help ensure that disputes are resolved within existing power structures. Rather than representing a threat to the Party-state therefore, these actors can potentially contribute to maintaining social stability.

While the Panguanying case thus points to the limitations of a 'scaling up' of local contention based on collaborative efforts between different affected communities, it shows that the vertical linkages between local communities and the national-level 'no-burn' community may indeed strengthen a national-level issue network that tackles not only the risks related to waste incineration, but also broader environmental issues. This finding is not restricted to the case of waste incineration, but has also been demonstrated for PX related risks, where local concerns have produced a national issue-campaign headed by environmentalists.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, it shows how information technology enables communities to actively learn from each other and draw from a readily available information source to fight for environmental rights. Although political constraints undermine the formation of personal cross-community ties, local environmental campaigns such as opposition to waste incinerators are no longer a purely isolated affair.

## Notes on the contributors

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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<sup>134</sup>See Note 129.

<sup>135</sup>See Note 129.

## Appendix. List of Interviews

NGO FON1 19-10-12. Friends of Nature staff 1, October 19, 2012.  
NGO NU1 7-11-12. Nature University staff 1, Beijing, November 7, 2012.  
NGO NU2 18-10-11. Nature University staff 2, Beijing, October 18, 2011.  
NGO NU2 29-10-12. Nature University staff 2, Beijing, October 29, 2012.  
NGO NU2 8-5-13. Nature University staff 2, Beijing, May 8, 2013.  
NGO NU2 26-3-14. Nature University staff 2, Beijing, March 26, 2014.  
NGO NU2 1-7-15. Nature University staff 2, Beijing, July 1, 2015.  
NGO NU3 25-7-13. Nature University staff 3, Beijing, July 25, 2013.  
NGO NU3 26-3-14. Nature University staff 3, Beijing, March 26, 2014.  
PGY1 4-11-12. Panguanying village leader 1, Panguanying, November 4, 2012.  
PGY1 5-11-12. Panguanying village leader 1, Panguanying, November 5, 2012.  
PGY1 27-7-13. Panguanying village leader 1, Panguanying, July 27, 2013.  
PGY2 4-11-12. Panguanying village leader 2, Panguanying, November 4, 2012.  
PGY2 5-11-12. Panguanying village leader 2, Panguanying, November 5, 2012.  
PGY2 27-7-13. Panguanying village leader 2, Panguanying, July 27, 2013.  
PGY2 28-7-13. Panguanying village leader 2, Panguanying, July 28, 2013.  
PGY3 28-7-13. Panguanying village leader 3, Panguanying, July 28, 2013.  
Xia 6-11-12. Lawyer Xia, Beijing, November 6, 2012.  
Xia 30-7-13. Lawyer Xia, Beijing, July 30, 2013.  
Zhao 8-11-12. Zhao Zhangyuan, Beijing, November 8, 2012.