Saving the “last” River in China: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis of the Campaign to Stop the Nujiang Dams Project

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Abstract

Despite a successful campaign led by Chinese environmental groups which resulted in the suspension of the 13 proposed mainstream dams on the Nujiang/Salween River in 2004, the role of civil society in water governance issues in China is under-researched and under-discussed in South East Asian forums, particularly from a gender and feminist perspective.

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the case of the Nujiang dam’s campaign, and in particular to understand how gender, ethnicity and class influenced the outcome of the campaign. I will do this specifically by examining the political opportunities and resources that were available to the campaigners using the lens of gender and intersectional feminism. Through this method, this paper shows how intersectional feminism can deepen and strengthen social movement theory analysis.

The main research finding is that the social identity of the campaigners as well-connected and predominantly Han women environmentalists were factors that influenced the campaign’s political opportunities and resources available, and overall helped lead to a successful outcome in the suspension of the dams. I find that class and ethnic factors influenced the environmental groups’ political opportunities, in particular their access to elites in the central government, ability to exploit the division between the central and local governments’ approaches to environmentalism, and relatively low repression from the government. Meanwhile, the campaigners also utilized gender-based strategies through their use of resources, particularly the use of women’s emotions as a mobilizing tool.
for the general public, and men as “rational” experts with legitimacy in the eyes of the government. Therefore, while the campaign was successful in its ultimate goal of stopping the dam project, it also illustrates some wider inequalities based on gender, ethnicity and class in China.

Introduction

Several hours into the two-day journey from Kunming to the Nujiang River Valley, a remote area of Western Yunnan, China, in a minivan full of journalists and prominent Nujiang anti-dams activists, I turned to the woman next to me to discuss my research topic.

“I’m writing about the civil society movement to stop the Nujiang dam,” I explained.

She looked surprised. “But there is no civil society. There is no social movement.1 We don’t have any….local people here.”

Looking around the minivan, I could indeed see that every person there was from Beijing or Kunming, highly educated, and from elite or middle class status: academics, journalists and international NGOs. It was also striking that there was only one man in the van. Given that they represented the main campaigners working to stop the dam project, I wondered what were the implications of running a campaign that was not led by the affected people themselves, but predominantly by journalists and urban environmentalists.

Furthermore, I found that while other research had been conducted on this significant case study, one of the few success stories of anti-dam campaigns in

1I use the term “civil society” to mean any groups or collections of individuals “which are independent from family, government or business, promote a public interest, and do not seek economic profit.” (Matelski, 2013, p. 154). This may include NGOs, CSOs, religious and interest groups, and social movements. For social movements, I refer to Jenkins’ (1983) classification of “classical social movement organizations” versus “professional social movement organizations”. Classical SMOs are defined by “indigenous leadership, volunteer staff, extensive membership, resources from direct beneficiaries, and actions based on mass participation” while professional SMOs” have “outside leadership, full time paid staff, small or nonexistent membership, resources from conscience constituencies, and actions that “speak for” rather than involve an aggrieved group” (p. 533). Based on these definitions, there is, in fact a Nujiang anti-dams civil society even if it does not include local people, and it almost perfectly fits the definition of a professional SMO.
the Mekong region, most of the existing research about the campaign only briefly discussed or made no mention at all of the identities or social dimensions of the campaign, including gender, ethnicity, and class. This is not unique to Chinese environmental civil society; as Howell (2007) notes, to date, “civil society theorists have paid scant attention to the gendered nature of civil society” (p. 416).

Yet, looking around the van, it seemed clear to me that the ability to influence policy and lead environmental campaigns took place in the context of the social identity of the campaigners, and to not acknowledge this would miss a key understanding of the dynamics in China of how civil society’s influence and successes vary especially according to who is campaigning, but also when, where, and on what issue.

Feminist research and intersectional feminism specifically is an approach which lends itself well to an analysis of these dynamics of identity and power. Feminist research aims to bring a gender lens into consideration, analyses relationships of power between men and women, and takes into account “politics of difference” including race, gender, and class. Intersectional feminism brings a deeper analysis to gender and feminist theory by showing that women are not all the same and experience different degrees of oppression and opportunities depending on the other identities they may hold. As Brooks and Hesse Biber (2007) note, “by asking the questions ‘which women?’ and ‘whose experiences?’ feminists of color have broadened the scope of feminist research (p.19). In order to show these complexities, intersectional feminism looks at how race, ethnicity, class, gender and other social identities such as sexuality or disability interplay (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Using this approach, my research will use an intersectional feminist lens to look at how gender, ethnicity and class in China impacted the political opportunities and resources available for the Nujiang anti-dams campaigners.

Overall, I find that the identities of the Nujiang campaigners in the context of gender, ethnic and class dynamics in China did have an influence on the dynamics and outcome of the campaign. As well-connected Han (the majority ethnic group in China) and middle class professionals, the campaigners were able
to access elite decision makers, take advantage of the local-central government division on environmental protection and campaign on a sensitive issue without facing severe (albeit still significant) repression. This stands in contrast to the treatment of the directly impacted communities in the Nujiang, where local authorities have used police monitoring and intimidation to ensure that these predominantly ethnic minority and grassroots communities do not speak publically at all about the project (Interviews with Dr. Yu Xiaogang and Green Watershed, March 2016). Gender based strategies also influenced the campaign, as women used self-described “emotional” tactics to persuade the public about the issue and raise awareness, while men used “rational” tactics to influence policy makers and authorities through scientific evidence and analysis.

Of course, it should be noted that social dynamics were not the sole factor which influenced the outcome of the campaign: other significant factors have already been well researched, including the role of international organizations and transnational advocacy (Matsuzawa, 2011), the influence of the media and environmental journalism in particular (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Xie 2011) and a growing trend towards environmentalism in China (Ho, 2001). Gender, class and ethnic dynamics are among the many complex factors at play in the Nujiang campaign; while they cannot explain the result on their own, they are still particularly significant to examine as under-researched areas in social movement and civil society scholarship.

While the campaign’s end result was successful, the dynamics of the campaign also bring to light gender, class and ethnic inequalities and cleavages within Chinese society. By and large, the voices of the local communities that would be impacted by the project are unheard in the debate. In terms of gender, while women are leaders of the campaign, they also generally do not hold the status of “experts” with the authority to influence the government; for this purpose predominantly male scientists and academics are brought in. Therefore, the Nujiang case raises some questions about identity and empowerment through the process of social movements, and whether the means justify the ends when it comes to winning campaigns.
In order to explain these findings, I will start with an explanation of the methodology used in this research project. I will then give some context on civil society and environmentalism in an authoritarian context in China, and background information on the Nujiang dams project and campaign. Finally, I will discuss my research findings, the influential factors on the outcome of the Nujiang campaign, which show how gender, ethnicity and class status influenced the political opportunities available and resources mobilized during the campaign.

**Methodology**

For this research, I used a primarily qualitative research approach, collecting both secondary and primary information through semi-structured in-depth interviews, informal interviews and non-participatory observation. I conducted a total of 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews, and also included information from an additional 10 informal interviews. To conduct non-participatory observation, I joined a group of environmentalists visiting the Nujiang River Valley and visited the offices of several ENGOs (environmental NGOs) in Beijing and Kunming to observe their activities. I also collected a small amount of quantitative data through surveys of 11 ENGOs in Yunnan and Beijing on the gender and ethnicity makeup of their staff, though considering the small sample size, I consider this to be more illustrative than definitive data.

The interviews were conducted with Chinese women and men engaged in environmental issues in Yunnan province, with the majority having a specific Nujiang focus, as well as several journalists, academics, and local residents of the Nujiang. Out of 21 interviews, 17 were women and 4 were men; 13 were Han, 4 were Tibetan, and the other 4 were Naxi, Bai, Lisu and Hani. Informal interviews were conducted with an additional 10 people during the Nujiang dams trip. To conduct this research, I visited Yunnan Province twice and Beijing once between November 2015 and April 2016, and also conducted some interviews with key informants in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, Thailand.
Security and ethics were a concern, given the sensitivity of hydropower issues in China. As some groups were reluctant to talk with outsiders, I was fortunate to be able to make connections with environmental groups in China through help from my personal and professional network. I also checked whether interviewees preferred to keep their name or organization anonymous, an option many of them chose.

**Background: Civil Society and Environmentalism in Authoritarian China**

Despite operating in an authoritarian context, civil society groups and ENGOs (environmental NGOs) in particular have proliferated to become a significant force in China since the early 1990s. As Sun and Zhao (2008) note, ENGOs in China have “considerable mobilization capacity, international networks, and a history of several successful environmental campaigns” (p. 144).

However, they have not always been recognized as such in civil society literature. As Büsgen (2006) argues, much of the problem with past literature on ENGOs in China comes from the Western concept of civil society being an entirely autonomous entity from the state. While many academics look at China’s civil society through a “relational” lens and conclude that it is very weak, Büsgen points out that civil society in China is actually very effective when considering it through a “functional contribution” lens, through which we can see the actual contributions of civil society towards “promoting participation, debate and pluralism” in China as significant and important (p. 2).

Despite restrictions which vary from bureaucratic obstacles in receiving registration and funding to police monitoring, intimidation and repression employed by the state, NGOs are able to find strategic ways to operate and navigate such conditions. As Saich (2000) notes, “structures and regulations exist to bind these organizations to state patronage and control their activities. However, social practice reveals a pattern of negotiation that minimizes state penetration and allows such organizations to reconfigure the relationship with the state in more beneficial terms that can allow for policy input or pursuit of members' interests and organizational goals” (p. 125-6).
Moreover, civil society does not necessarily have to be oppositional to the state, and may even contribute to the stability of a regime when its activities and aims align with the interests of the regime. Teets (2014) demonstrates this concept by introducing the idea of “consultative authoritarianism” as a way of understanding the state’s relationship with civil society in China, where civil society may be allowed and even encouraged under certain circumstances, when their collaboration and support is found to be useful to the government and they are deemed sufficiently non-threatening -- a condition which is frequently correlated with ethnic identity and the topic at issue. She describes this model as simultaneously encouraging “the formation and development of an autonomous civil society while creating new, more indirect methods of control” (p. xi). As one Beijing based academic explained this:

“The government's attitude to NGOs is that you can be my helper but you are not my master [emphasis added]. NGOs can have more political space compared to the past but only if you follow what is the government's interest...you can work as long as you help me with my agenda. You can't come in with your own agenda that could be more powerful than me, like women's rights groups....Environmental groups go in the same line with government policy, so they can be allowed and given more space”.

(Anonymous Interview, April 2016).

Environmental groups have benefited and grown in particular as environmental protection becomes a top concern for China’s authorities, due to concerns over the impact of environmental damage on both GDP and social unrest (Economy, 2004). While earlier environmental campaigns focused on politically safer issues such as the protection of endangered species, the support of SEPA (the State Environmental Protection Authority) and other changes in the state-society relationship have stimulated ENGOs to start to take up more sensitive issues such as anti-dams (Sun and Zhou, 2008, p. 160).

When looking at ENGOs in China from an intersectional feminist perspective, it is remarkable that the issue of gender and class has rarely been touched upon in the literature. Out of the 11 ENGOs that I interviewed in Beijing and Yunnan

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2 Now the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP); will be referred to throughout this paper as SEPA in reference to its name at the time of the events.
province, eight had women leaders and almost half of the organizations had no male staff at all. Meanwhile, all 11 ENGOs had a Han leader, and seven had no ethnic minority staff at all. While this is of course a small fraction of the ENGOs in China and therefore not necessarily representative, it does seem to reflect a general trend, as discussed by many of my interviewees; the landscape of urban ENGOs in particular is predominantly female and Han.

**Background of the Nujiang Project and Campaign**

The Nujiang, which means “Angry River” in Chinese, is known for being one of the only major rivers in China without any mainstream dams, as well as a site of spectacular beauty. Originating on the Tibetan Plateau, the Nujiang, or Nu River, flows through the Tibetan Autonomous Region before passing through the most western regions of Yunnan province in China along the Myanmar-China border, after which it crosses the border down to Myanmar and Thailand, where it is known as the Thanlwin and Salween respectively.

Hearing of the Yunnan provincial government’s plan to build a cascade of 13 dams and two reservoirs on the mainstream of the Nu River together with the Huadian Power International Company, urban environmentalists mobilized to take action to try to keep this “last” river undammed. (Lin, 2007, p.169). The key leaders of the campaign were Wang Yongchen of Green Earth Volunteers and Dr. Yu Xiaogang of Green Watershed in partnership with other ENGOs, mainly International Rivers, Friends of Nature, Global Village Beijing and the now-defunct China Rivers Network, as well as NGO workers and volunteers, journalists, academics and scientists who played a supporting role. The campaign also worked closely together with individuals from SEPA, who provided key information and support to environmentalists (Sun and Zhou, 2008, 151-156).
As Wang Yong Chen explained the origins of the campaign,

“In 2003, I had a friend who works in SEPA, he was thinking that in the whole of China, we have already set up large scale dams, except two rivers, one of which is the Nu River. So this high official in SEPA, he said we need to keep this one natural river for the next generation [emphasis added]”. (Interview, March 16, 2016)

The ensuing campaign from 2003-4 which resulted in the suspension of the dam in February 2004 by Premier Wen Jiabao was “one of the most high advocacy campaigns….and controversial cases of NGO advocacy as yet” (Büsgen, 2006, p. 6). Unlike the Three Gorges dam campaign, which was unsuccessful in its policy goal and resulted in a strong backlash against the leaders, the Nujiang anti-dams campaign was successful in its goal of stopping the mainstream dams and keeping the Nujiang issue in the spotlight of media attention (Xie and Van der Heijin, 2010).

While the project was suspended in 2004, the campaign has continued at a lower level until the present day, due to concerns of environmentalists that the project could be revived again in the future. Over the past 12 years, they have used a variety of strategies to keep pressure on both the local authorities and central government from re-starting the project, including an annual media trip for journalists and NGOs to the Nujiang river, collecting scientific data and evidence about geological instability in the area, meeting with policy makers, making connections with downstream NGOs and international organizations, and public awareness activities such as photo exhibitions in Kunming and Beijing (Interviews with Wang Yongchen, Dr Yu Xiaogang and International Rivers, March 2016).

Although the campaign cannot be called an outright success as the dams remain under suspension, rather than permanently cancelled, it is clear that the campaign had a significant impact on influencing policy, as evidenced by Premier Wen Jiabao’s remarks when announcing the suspension of the project: that

“We should carefully consider and make a scientific decision about major hydroelectric projects like this that have aroused a high level of concern in society and with which the environmental protection side disagrees [emphasis added]” (Teets, 2014, p. 115).
Furthermore, campaigners now believe Nujiang dams are highly unlikely to be built, due to the announcement from the Yunnan provincial government that the Nujiang river area in Yunnan province will become a national park area with two parks, the Grand Canyon National Park and Dulong River National Park already approved as of May 2016 (Zhaohui, 2016).

While the lead ENGOs also have concerns with the environmental impact of the large scale tourism development the national parks are likely to bring, they still unanimously expressed that this would be a vastly superior result than the dam project (Interviews with Wang Yongchen, Dr Yu Xiaogang and International Rivers, 2016). Environmentalists claimed a further victory in 2016 upon the announcement that the Nujiang dams project was not included in the 13th 5 year development plan for China (Interview with Wang Yongchen, March 16, 2016).

When looking at the identities of the campaigners, similar to the trend of ENGOs in general in China, Han women make up the majority of the environmentalists who are working on the Nujiang issue. Out of the three organizations still highly active on the Nujiang dam, all the staff and leaders are women except for Dr. Yu of Green Watershed, and all are Han or international staff based in urban areas such as Beijing and Kunming (Interviews with International Rivers, Green Watershed and Green Earth Volunteers, March 2016). On the other hand, the dam-affected area, the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture is one of the more remote and least developed prefectures in China; over half of its residents live under the poverty line, and most are ethnic minorities (Hu and Li, 2014). There are nine ethnic groups living in the Nujiang area, with the majority of the population being ethnic Nu, Lisu, Bai, or Tibetan (Grumbine, 2010). In the next section I will discuss more about the campaign and how the identities of the campaigners and local communities influenced the methods and outcomes of their work.
Influential Factors on the Outcome of the Nujiang Campaign

Table 1: Influential Factors on the Outcome of the Nujiang Campaign

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<tr>
<th>Political Opportunities</th>
<th>Resources Mobilized</th>
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<td>Intersectional Feminist Lens: Gender, Ethnicity and Class Analysis</td>
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The Nujiang dams campaign’s successes and challenges should be understood in the context of three interconnected factors. The first is the government’s own structure, interests, and relationship with civil society; or simply, the political context; one way of understanding this is through the framework of political opportunities (McAdam et al, 1996). The second is civil society’s own ability and resources available to organize and mobilize effectively. Resource mobilization theory posits that groups need strong organization and resources (both material and non-material) such as money, labor, legitimacy and media attention in order to achieve their goals (Jenkins, 1981, Tilly, 1978).

The third factor, which has been woven throughout the paper, is that both available political opportunities and the group’s ability to mobilize resources are influenced by gender, ethnicity and class factors. I find that in the case of the Nujiang, gender, ethnic and class identities had a significant influence on the strategies and successes of the campaign. While ethnicity and class influenced the political opportunities available to the campaigners, gendered strategies shaped the campaign’s use of resources.

Political Opportunities

The Nujiang environmentalists were able to take advantage of several factors which created the political opportunities necessary for them to influence policy change. McAdam’s (1996) framework of political opportunities identifies 1) increasing access to the political system 2) a divided elite 3) elite allies and 4) limited state repression as the most significant factors necessary for groups to be able to influence social change. In the case of the Nujiang, I find that the most
significant opportunities in this case were a divided elite, elite allies, and low state repression on this particular issue and towards the individuals in the campaign.

These political opportunities were very much influenced by ethnicity and class factors in particular. The Nujiang campaign is a classic example of how complex and dynamic political opportunity can be, particularly in the case of China. As O’Brien and Stern note when describing political opportunity and environmentalism in China, “there is not one unitary, national, opportunity structure, but multiple, crosscutting openings and obstacles to mobilization...The most obvious way to unpack opportunity is by social group.....opportunity also varies by region and issue (2008, p. 14). Through the lens of intersectional feminism, I will attempt to unpack how opportunity was influenced particularly by class and ethnicity in this case.

**Elite Allies and a Divided Elite**

Elite allies in SEPA played an influential role in furthering and legitimizing the Nujiang anti-dam movement. A personal friend of Wang Yong Chen, Pan Yue joined SEPA in 2003 as a vice minister, who publically described ENGOs as a “government ally” of SEPA. At that time, SEPA had limited resources -- only 300 staff members -- and struggled to wield significant authority (Economy, 2004, p. 21). Therefore, ENGOs were seen by individuals within SEPA as allies who could help advance their environmental agenda, through influencing the general public, and using their ability to take more critical stances than a government agency could. The relationship has been reciprocal; as O’Brien and Stern note, ENGOs also “cultivate highly placed allies in the State Environmental Protection Agency and urge them to put pressure on grassroots officials” (2008, p.14-15).

Alongside cultivating elite allies, the Nujiang campaigners also used the divide between the local authorities, SEPA and the CPC and State top leadership in order to push for their agenda. While the project was backed by the Nujiang authorities and the Yunnan provincial government, key figures in SEPA opposed the project and the campaigners also believed the central government’s top
leadership could be persuaded to intervene against the project. The table below shows this breakdown:

Table 2: Conflicting Policy Goals and a Divided Elite

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pro-Hydropower Project</th>
<th>Opposed or Concerned to Hydropower Project</th>
<th>Unknown/Un clear or Divided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local/Provincial Level</td>
<td>• Nujiang Prefecture Authorities</td>
<td>• Yunnan ENGOS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Yunnan Provincial Government</td>
<td>• Local villagers from Nujiang region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Huaneng Power International Company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Level</td>
<td>• Ministry of Water Resources</td>
<td>• SEPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• National Development and Reform Commission</td>
<td>• Beijing based national ENGOS</td>
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<td>• Executive</td>
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<td>• State Council</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• CPC Leaders</td>
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On the one side, the Yunnan provincial government strongly supported the project, one reason being the revenue that the project would bring in. Since the 1980s, the central government has not only decentralized fiscal policy to provincial and local governments and given them the main responsibility to manage services such as social security, education and healthcare, but has also restricted their ability to tax local people, therefore most local governments operate under high levels of local debt (Teets, 2014, p. 16). To manage this, provincial and local governments have turned to sources of revenue such as hydroelectric power to bring in additional revenue.

On the other hand, as Sun and Zhou note, “the central government is increasingly environmentally conscious, and has tolerated and even encouraged
the growth of ENGOs” (2008, p. 150-151). Environmentalists have been encouraged by statements from Premier Xi Jinping such as a "green mountain is a golden mountain" (Chen, 2016) and journalists have been tolerated and encouraged by the central authorities to report on environmental issues (Anonymous interview with journalist, April 27th, 2016). Considering these divided interests, Nujiang environmentalists focused much of their energies on advocating towards the CPC and central government leadership as a potential ally which had the authority to stop the project from moving forward (Interview with Dr, Yu, November 25th, 2015).

An intersectional feminist lens can help explore how these strategies of building alliances with elites and exploiting elite divisions were based upon class and ethnic identities. While Sun and Zhou argue that “the top leadership tends to offer support to ENGOs when there is no or little opposition to an environmental campaign (2008, p.159), this support is very much dependent upon the identity of the group in question. As urban based, well known and respected Han journalists and environmentalists, Wang Yongchen, Dr. Yu and other campaigners were able to cultivate and use their personal relationships (guangxi) and their status to gain more support and legitimacy for the Nujiang dams cause.

One example demonstrates how different the political opportunities available are in China to urban Han groups versus Tibetan and other ethnic minority and/or rural environmentalists. In an interview with a Tibetan woman working with a predominantly Tibetan rural environmental organization in Yunnan province, she discussed the restrictions by the government that her organization faced and their inability to work on sensitive issues such as hydropower. Despite avoiding political activities, they had decided to register as a company and hire a Han director in the hopes of reducing the pressure on their organization.

“Even as a company, the police are still watching us. They come to our activities, they see us as sensitive….After I book a flight ticket, every time, they call me, want to know where I’m going; I don’t know exactly how they know when I book a ticket, of course they are monitoring us. But I think it’s okay because everything we do is legal and good for people -- just protecting culture, language. When we make documentaries
we don't have sensitive films….I share everything with the police -- our documentaries, proposals, they can see for themselves that we are not doing anything wrong….Working on dams, it's too difficult….And the country is too strong. Asking for compensation is possible, but stopping the dam is impossible. Policemen will put you in jail; they catch one or two people if they protest and make everyone afraid”.

(Anonymous interview, December 1st, 2015)

While organizations such as hers face significant restrictions even for non-political activities, Han identified organizations, particularly Beijing-based organizations have been able to advocate on sensitive issues such as the Nujiang and gain the support of elite allies in SEPA and the central government. Note the following account of Wang Yongchen’s work on the Nujiang as she describes using her network of government officials, scientists, celebrities, journalists and INGOs to build high level and elite support:

“In 2003, I have a friend, he works in the Environmental Department, he was thinking that whole of China has set up the big dams, except two rivers, one of which is the Nu river….So after I know this issue that the whole country is setting up hydropower, we find some scientists to explain why we need to preserve this river…and in 2003 September we have a big conference in China, and in this conference I told more people about this issue. In this conference we have a lot of film stars….In 2004, I found journalists, so this is the first time, …[to go to Nujiang], and we got such beautiful photos, because some serious journalists join us. I'm thinking before the Nu River, no one knew about it. Before it wasn’t developed as it is now., This area was very old, very poor, very dirty, but still, the river is so beautiful, so we made a very big photo exhibition in Beijing…in 2005, because this is a natural heritage area, so we also find more international NGOs and media to try to influence IUCN….Before in 2003 we were thinking we couldn't do something, we are just journalists, we produce articles, we are NGOs, we couldn't influence policy, but 13 years after, so I think maybe we can do something. After we met each other in Chiang Mai, after seeing my film, a lot of people said congratulations, thank you for keeping the river. I think maybe not easy, but we can do”. (Interview, March 16, 2016)
Of course, Han actors also have to navigate complex and sometimes dangerous waters; predominantly Han organizations can and often do get targeted if they step out of the boundaries of what the government deems acceptable. An analogy by Dr. Yu helps explain this dynamic. In an interview with Matsuzawa (2011) Dr. Yu placed a glass upside down and asked him to imagine that there was a grasshopper inside.

“At the beginning, the grasshopper will try to jump its maximum, not seeing himself surrounded by a glass wall and ceiling. Gradually, he will learn how high he can jump without hurting himself. The grasshopper is tamed, and will become a ‘good boy’ knowing his limitations” (Interview with Dr. Yu, November 2004 in Matsuzawa, p. 379).

To apply an intersectional feminist lens to this analogy, we can say that the size of the glass also depends on the ethnicity, gender, class, location, and issue that the “grasshopper” is working on. This dynamic also plays out in the differentiated response to urban environmentalists’ campaign activities versus the local Nujiang residents’, as I will outline in the next section.

**Limited State Repression**

The state’s propensity for repression on this particular issue and for some of the individuals involved in campaigning was weak enough to allow for the possibility of a successful campaign. To explain this, it is necessary to separate the response of the local Nujiang authorities, the Yunnan government and the central Beijing government. Throughout the Nujiang campaign, a spectrum of repression existed where the degree of repression increased with the degree of “local-ness” of the individuals involved. While local, ethnic minority community members faced and still continue to face strong threats and intimidation for speaking about the project, Kunming-based Han environmentalists faced strong pressure but were still able to continue to be active on the issue, while Han Beijing environmentalists faced relatively low repression.

At the most local prefectural level, Nujiang community members continue to be pressured by local authorities not to speak with outsiders about the project, as I
saw and experienced while visiting the region. Once our group entered the Nujiang prefecture, we were followed by a group of police and local authorities at all times. During meetings with local people along the Nujiang, the police took videos and photographs of all our interactions with local people, and specifically instructed the local residents we met with not to talk about the project with us. Without being able to ask the local authorities directly, we can only speculate why repression is more extreme at the local level; one environmental worker believed it was because of the local authorities’ conviction that the dams would be the best solution for economic development poverty alleviation in the region (Grumbine, 2010). Another noted that the majority of the local government officials were Han while the local people were ethnic minorities; given the context of ethnic activism by Tibetan and Uighur groups, it seems eminently possible and perhaps likely that any political activism involving minorities would be seen as threatening.

Urban ENGOs are well aware of the seemingly impenetrable barriers to participation for local communities, and frustrated by the situation. A former staff of Green Watershed explained her experience trying to work with local communities along the Nujiang:

“Green Watershed did some workshops with local people, brought people to see the Manwan dam, did trainings for local people on dam impacts, law and so on but they (the local people) cannot actually act. They were threatened a lot, the local government is too strong.”

She also expressed frustration at downstream ENGOs and funders who expected them to work with grassroots communities in the Nujiang:

“They need to understand, it’s totally unlike downstream (countries), where people can claim their rights” (Anonymous Interview, Dec 15, 2015).

Another Beijing-based environmentalist, comparing their work to downstream anti-dam groups in Thailand and Myanmar, stated with disappointment,

“It is my dream to work together with local communities on the Nujiang, actually.”
At the provincial level, the most active ENGO in Yunnan Province on the Nujiang, Green Watershed faced repression from the Yunnan authorities, although to a lesser degree than the local communities. Following the dam’s suspension in 2004, Yunnan authorities retaliated by confiscating Dr. Yu’s passport and investigating and seizing Green Watershed’s computers (Büsgen, 2006, p. 41). While some academics interpreted the higher level of repression faced by Green Watershed as the result of their more “radical” or “oppositional” tactics compared to Beijing groups (Economy, 2005; Teets, 2014), one former staff firmly rejected this explanation, arguing instead that

“Green Watershed did get more punishment because they are a local group and the Yunnan government can control them” (Anonymous Interview, December 15, 2015).

Teets (2014) herself also notes that the Yunnan and central government took diverging positions towards ENGOs, stating that while “Beijing allowed the formation of more autonomous groups, Yunnan developed more sophisticated tools of state control” (p. 82). Han environmentalists from Beijing faced much less repression for their work, except for being followed and monitored while visiting the Nujiang region (Interview with Wang Yonchgen, March 16, 2016). Of course, being followed while visiting local communities for 13 years is not trivial, but in their case the repression stops once leaving the Nujiang area, and does not prevent them from being able to work on the issue when in Beijing. The Beijing environmentalists’ ability to advocate on the issue without the repression faced by local communities and Yunnan ENGOs is therefore a political opportunity which has had a significant outcome on the campaign’s ability to sustain over the years.

**Resources Mobilized**

Elite allies, a divided elite, and limited repression alone cannot explain the outcome of the campaign; groups must also have some types of resources available to launch and sustain a campaign. The field of resource mobilization theory offers many ideas for which resources may influence the outcome of a campaign, though there is little agreement on which resources are most
important (Jenkins, 1983). McCarthy & Zald (1977) list money, labor, and legitimacy as some of the key factors; access to media and communications is also another important resource.

The Nujiang campaign can be characterized by a marked lack of resources in the sense of labor or money. The campaign has always consisted of a few key individuals, namely Wang Yongchen and Dr Yu Xiaogang with a small group of other supporters from other ENGOs, journalists and academics; there is no mass movement or grassroots support (Interviews with Wang Yongchen, Dr. Yu, March 2016). It almost perfectly fits McCarthy and Zald’s category of a “professional social movement organization”, characterized by “outside leadership, full time paid staff, small or nonexistent membership, resources from conscience constituencies, and actions that "speak for rather than involve an aggrieved group” (as cited in Jenkins, 1983: 533).

Financially, the campaigners have been able to get some funds for their activities, but their organizations are small and the funds are generally very limited. They have often relied on volunteer support, much of which came from women volunteers who are less well known for their contributions (Interviews with Wang Yongchen, Green Watershed, March 2016). The resources that they have benefited from the most are media attention and legitimacy from their status as high profile environmentalists and journalists, support from some scientists and geologists, and a small number of committed activists’ - mainly women’s - time and energy.

In terms of media, Yang and Calhoun observe that, “Chinese environmentalists attach great importance to mobilizing the mass media and have been remarkably successful in this respect” (2007, p. 221). This is mainly due to the fact that many ENGO founders and staff come from media backgrounds. Wang Yongchen herself is a well-known journalist and has been described as someone “in the central media circle….Wang’s program can arouse society’s interest and to a certain extent, influence the government’s decisions” (China Green News, 2009).

Through Green Earth Volunteers, Wang and Zhang Kejia, a journalist at China Youth Daily have organized regular journalist salons in Beijing on environmental
issues which has kept the Nujiang issue in the attention of the media over the years (Yang and Calhoun, 2007). Another key strategy has been the organizing of an annual trip to the Nujiang where journalists visit the area itself, see its natural beauty, and build their motivation to write and cover the issues.

Alongside media strategies, Wang Yongchen, Dr. Yu and International Rivers have also sought out alliances with scientists, geologists and policy makers to provide “legitimacy” to their work through scientific evidence on the geological instability and risk of earthquakes in the Nujiang area. Dr. Yu believes that the support of scientists has been one of the most important resources available to their efforts, as Premier Wen Jiabao is a geologist by training (Interview with Dr. Yu, November 25, 2015).

I find that these resources of “media” and “legitimacy” take on particularly gendered expressions in this campaign. As Kuumba notes, a gendered analysis of social movements is important because “social movements have the possibility to reproduce as well as transform gender inequalities, structures and belief systems” (2001, p. 2-3). The resources available and used by the environmentalists took on gendered roles as women took on the “practical” and “media” work of the campaign through organizing activities and telling the messages and stories of the campaign through the media, while men did the “knowledge” work of law, scientific evidence and policy influence with the government. One of the key women activists who was highly involved in the campaign but did not take a high profile stated:

The women's role in the campaign was to make it more popular and raise popular awareness. Wang Yongchen is a symbol of the campaign, she is emotional, she kept it going for 10 years….Men argue about the theoretical dimensions, while women did the practical work -- writing articles, organizing events, trips. Green Watershed focused more on law and policy; 70% of the “knowledge” work is done by men -- on dams, science, etc. Men went to the EIA meetings, talked to the government. Women generated activities. Wang Yongchen invited men such as geologists to be experts on the trip to Salween. Men were more likely to do the negotiations also, such as former government officials, they could also provide
knowledge on what they learned working (Anonymous Interview, December 2015).

Wang Yongchen’s strategy of using her own well known persona and influencing the public to take action through the use of her emotions is also a gendered strategy and resource. Wang frequently uses her own emotions as a way of mobilizing others to take action on the Nujiang. At the end of her documentary about the Nujiang, she cries about the future of the river. Wang Yongchen is often described as “emotional”; as a characteristic that can help her mobilize and build public support and awareness for the campaign, but that also leads her to be criticized by those who think she is not objective or rational enough. One woman journalist and environmentalist who worked closely with the campaign in its earlier years stated:

“Why women are more involved (on Nujiang issues)? Maybe because women are more emotional. Look at Wang Yongchen, she is a perfect example. She’s very emotional and I think her emotion really gets out and affects people. Men are too rational...Dr Yu, he can never tell a good story like Wang Yongchen can. I think especially, in the earlier stage of the environmental movement, the stories, emotions are more effective if you want to mobilize people, they have to feel it. So in a certain way Wang Yongchen’s style is more effective and then there are a lot of academic people who don’t like her because she is too emotional. I think to outreach to the common people, to the general public she’s very effective but on the opposite if we want to convince government or academics maybe we need people like Yu Xiaogang who can present arguments more rationally” (Anonymous Interview, March 18, 2016).

These gendered strategies and use of resources were effective in building support for the campaign, by dividing the labor to have women take the role of building public sympathy and awareness for the campaign, and men to work on persuading other male academics or officials through “rational” and scientific arguments. While this point cannot be conclusively answered, it is also interesting to consider whether the “emotional” strategy employed by Wang Yongchen which is perceived as feminized would be considered less directly threatening in an authoritarian context to Chinese authorities compared to a rights-based or shaming approach.
Although men and women played generally different roles in the Nujiang campaign, it is important to note the women expressed that they had never felt a hierarchy between men and women stating “it (the division of labor) was collaborative though -- more do what you can do” (Anonymous Interview, December 15, 2015). At the same time, a gendered division of labor where men take on “knowledge” or “expert” roles as policy influencers, and where the role of women is to do the “practical” work and influence the public through emotions does raise some implications about the reinforcement of gender norms and values.

Conclusion and Synthesis

It would be deterministic to argue that social identity is a deciding or corresponding factor in the success or failure of social movements. Many powerful movements emerge from groups with marginalized identities, and both grassroots and “professional” social movements can count successes and failures to their name. Therefore, it seems unhelpful to attempt to generalize whether holding a particular identity is a resource or opportunity in general. Yet in the case of the Nujiang campaign in the social and political context in China, it is clear that the political opportunities the campaigners were able to access, resources mobilized, and strategies employed in the campaign were strongly influenced by their gender, class and ethnic identities.

While none of the interviewees argued that gender was the key reason for the success of the campaign, gender did influence the resources and strategies used by the campaigners, in particular the division of labor as men mainly took on traditional “expert” roles such as academics, scientists and geologists, while women’s labor focused on “practical” work such as organizing activities, writing articles, and building relationships, as well as “emotional” work through public awareness raising through the media and storytelling.

Intersectional feminism argues that we must not only look at gender, but also other forms of social marginalization including ethnicity and class. It is not enough to highlight gender dynamics and women’s contributions, we should also
identify which women and men by looking more deeply into issues such as class and ethnicity. When looking at the Nujiang campaign through the lens of ethnicity and class, as one NGO staff explained, it is very much a “middle class campaign.” As Han, urban, and well-connected environmentalists, the Nujiang environmentalists were able to mobilize both popular awareness and high level elite and political support for their agenda in a way that would be far more difficult for ethnic minority, rural and grassroots environmentalists to do, due to the social and political constraints outlined in this paper.

Looking at the two key leaders of the campaign, therefore, class, ethnicity and gender dynamics come together to create a social context which posits Dr. Yu, a highly educated, scientifically oriented, well respected older Han male professor, to be a respected spokesperson to discuss on behalf of Nujiang communities with government authorities and key decision makers, and Wang Yongchen, a charismatic, highly educated, Han professional and described “emotional” woman from Beijing, to be the voice of the Nujiang environmental movement to the general Han public in China.

The fact of the Nujiang environmental network operating as a professional social movement with these dynamics could be problematic or not depending on one’s viewpoint. On the one hand, the campaign can be read as an example of those with more opportunity using their power to advocate on behalf of those who are unable to speak out. It is fair to say that the ENGOs have successfully used their relatively privileged position to bring the concerns of local communities to a national and international audience. This viewpoint is evidenced by the ongoing repression of local communities in the Nujiang which does not allow them to speak openly about the dam projects without fear of reprisal. On the other hand, without any local people’s participation, not only is it impossible to know whether the campaign accurately represents the voices of local people, but there is also a risk of replicating social power inequalities through the campaign itself. Due to the dynamics of power, privilege and repression in China, there are no easy or simple solutions to this problem.

While urban environmentalists working on the Nujiang issue have tried to include the participation of local people in their work, they have ultimately found
themselves working in a context which allows their voices and perspectives to be heard while local, minority and indigenous voices are silenced. In addition, their work also reflects and is influenced by gender roles and gender dynamics. However, despite these challenges, it is still significant that environmental groups in China can find ways to effect change despite the constraints they face, and have won a significant victory in the suspension of the dam.
References


