

## **Political Opportunity and Anti-dam Construction Movement in China<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Introduction*

In recent years, resettlement and environmental issues as well as other problems related to dam construction, which are triggered off by the hydroelectricity development fervor in the south-west China, are brought under the spotlight. In China, the intense debate on dam construction was no more dominated by the government and the market, but also brawled with various forces from the civil society such as environmental protection NGOs, mass media, academia and local communities. They are making stronger appeals and gradually formed a united force of the civil society. They work upward through public opinion and policy advocacy channels; working downward, they empower and mobilize the mass on community level. This kind of civic engagement is so pertinent in China that attracted prominent coverage in the media. They believe that it is the first time ever public involvement starts influencing the decision-making process of China.

The anti-dam construction movement began with the so-called “Sichuan Dujiangyan protest”, climaxing with the Nujiang anti-dam construction movement. The following Hutiaoxia protest again drew attention domestically and internationally; places such as Renzhonghai, Moge Luo Lake and Pubugou were dragged into the movement. Until then, it seems that a pattern has been developed: the “external elites” (as contrast to local residents around the dams) from different fields such as environmental protection NGOs, academia and mass media act as pioneer in the anti-dam movement. They attempt to influence the government, shape public opinion, and even start penetrating downwards to articulate a “rights-protection movement” in grass-root level.

Different from other collective actions or civil resistance, the anti-dam

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construction actions, which scattered around various districts, have started to form into networks and concerted actions, revealing an evolving social movement network. They are not independent events but more like a continuing process. In such a process, a sustainable network formation is taking shape. Discourse in connection to anti-dam campaign is being constructed, gradually developing into a nation-wide movement with organizational force and consistent appeal. It also extends itself from pure ecological concerns to social and environmental justice, with greater cultural and social implications. This form of anti-dam construction campaign could be deemed as a social movement as defined by Donatella and Diani (1999:16-19)<sup>2</sup>.

How does it happen under an authoritarian regime like China? In the past 20 years, the occurrence of social movement is not more than rare in China. From the “political process model” perspective, such rareness can be explained by the lack of political opportunity for social movement under the authoritarian if not post-totalitarian political system of China. (Chan, 2005b) Then, how did anti-dam construction movement stand out in these few years and develop, sustain and grow?

Using Nujiang (Angry River) case as a typical anti-dam construction movement, this article attempts to solve the puzzle of how this social movement emerged under the existing regime in China from the political opportunity structure perspective. Why at such timing? Is it a unique case or in a wider perspective, revealing a direction of social change? How to interpret its social implication?

The case is typical as Nujiang dam construction is one of the most controversial subjects in public arena in the past few years in terms of heated discussion in mass media and internet. Premier Wun Jiabao’s statement “careful study, scientific decision” in response to this controversy, was seen as the first time ever public opinions effected on high level decision-making. It is also a typical case of social movement led by “external elites” composed of NGOs, movement elites and mass media while mass mobilization in local community was basically absent.

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<sup>2</sup> Donatella and Diani (1999: 16-19) discussed social movement as follows: “Social movement, especially those involved political content, (1) Informal interaction networks, (2) based on shared beliefs and solidarity, (3) which mobilized due to some conflicting issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest. ...Under what circumstances, these events can be regarded as a part of social movement? And in what circumstances will they only be an individual protest?...If treat it as a social movement, we have to treat individual event as a part of a long term movement, but not an ad hoc case. Moreover, participants of such event must feel a sense of belonging and linkage with the supporters of similar movements. From a local protest with specific aim, gradually developed into a national social movement with collective force, concern the relationship between the nature and society and contains delicate cultural content.”

### *Political process theory and political opportunity structure*

Political process theory (McAdam, 1982) has been the leading approach for social movement study in the past 20 years. Its most important core concept is “political opportunity structure”, i.e., the degree of openness of the political system that facilitates or constrains the emergence of social movement or other forms of insurgency. In recent years, debates over the framework of political process theory and political opportunity structure have been growing. In the following, the more prominent criticisms and their respective responses were summarized:

#### 1. “Structural determinism”

Some researchers think that political process theory interprets the existence of political opportunity as something given. It has a strong structural bias as this structure is seen as deterministic in the rise and fall of social movement. (Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). In fact, the existence and occurrence of political opportunity always involve an interpretative process of the movement participants or agents. The unrecognized and uninterpreted opportunities can neither be regarded as political opportunity, nor be utilized to affect a movement. In addition, political opportunity structure does not remain unchanged during different stages of a movement. It can be produced and magnified and should not be treated purely as something “given” or “static” and as an independent variable in causal analysis.

In response to such criticism, some researches divided movement into “initial stage” and “developmental stage” in order to better analyze the determining factors and movement processes (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996). This article further elaborates this viewpoint, analyzing how political opportunity operates in different stages. In the initial stage, structural factors such as socio-economic context, trend of change, and political opportunities are usually identified as favorable environment that allows the movement to emerge. Since in such an initial stage, interaction between the movement and its antagonists has not yet started, a relatively structural and static perspective can be used to analyze the political opportunity structure of the time.

In the developmental stage, however, organizers and participants of a movement gradually gain experience and develop better capacity through struggle. They begin to produce and expand their political opportunity through resources mobilization and framing process. On the other hand, their antagonists (e.g. government) will also adjust their own strategy and maneuver the political system to control the movement.

Therefore the idea of political opportunity becomes more dynamic at this stage. It continues to pose structural influences for the movement but at the same time, to be shaped and reproduced as a result of interactions among different parties involved in the movement. In light of this, political opportunity can also be treated as a result of this political dynamics or as a dependent variable in the causal analysis.

## 2. “Political reductionism”

Some critics consider that political process theory only concerns about the relationship between social movement and the government. In other words, it only concerns about the political dimension yet neglects the cultural aspect of social movement, which involves the reconstruction of meaning, culture and daily life. Apparently, the rise of new social movement supports this stance. Some scholars believe that the women movements, environmental movements, homosexual rights movements and other social movements in recent years have been engaged mainly in identity politics and reconfiguration of cultural ideas. In light of this, political opportunity structure has limited explanatory power in such movements. (Melucci 1994; Touraine 1988; Goodwin and Jasper 2003). We acknowledge the importance of the cultural dimension of anti-dam movement by analyzing its framing process in a separate paper and also adopt a more interpretive approach when dealing with the issue of political structure. We believe, however, that political opportunity cannot be reduced to cultural phenomenon particularly under a repressive regime with strong penetrative power.

## 3. The expansion of political opportunity structure: globalization effect

Unlike the previous “state-centered theory”, some researchers think that the political process and opportunity structure have exceeded the boundary of sovereign state. More and more political pressure is now originated from international community and has become an important component of political opportunity structure affecting local politics. Political opportunity is no longer limited within a nation-state or a political system, global factors gradually effect on local politics including the emergence and development of social movements (McAdam 1996). This study fully embraces this perspective and documents the importance of how NGOs exerts international pressure in the movement.

### *Political opportunity structure and its adaptation to China*

For the collective actions and social movement occurred in China, the analytical framework of political opportunity structure is rather applicable. As an authoritarian

regime, the Chinese state's overwhelming presence in the society makes social movements in China, including the supposedly new social movement like environmental movement, have to target on the state in the course of mobilization, instead of aiming at changing the values and lifestyles of the people as in the West. Thus, the core characteristic of social movement in China is still the strategic interaction between the movement and the regime.

Nonetheless, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime poses a serious challenge to the adoption of political opportunity model in the study of social movement. The political opportunity structure model and its related theory, particularly resources mobilization theory, originated from the western society which is set on a relatively liberal political system that allows room for mobilization. How does social movement in different kinds of regimes make use of political opportunities is largely neglected. In light of this, it is important to draw reference to the discussion on "state-society relationship" framework (Zhao 2001, Zhao, 2006) when we apply the idea of political opportunity structure in the case of China.

In Zhao's state-society relations framework, three issues are emphasized, including the nature of the state, the nature of society and the links or pattern between the state and society. Among the three, the third issue is most important which Zhao focused on the question of legitimacy of the regime. He points out that the base of legitimacy of the Chinese state has transformed from "ideology" to "performance". For legitimacy based on "performance", morality is equally important as economic development. This article varies from Zhao's viewpoint by considering that performance does not link directly with moral appeal. Instead, after the 1990s, "morality and equity" gradually gain the same position with "performance" as the basis of legitimacy when overwhelming pressure had been generated from the widening wealth gap and the conflict between economic development and environmental protection. Zhao's framework emphasizes heavily on macro-structural analysis, thus making it relatively weak on grasping on the micro dynamics of political opportunity. As a result, Zhao's model fails to replace the political opportunity structure theory but can act as a useful supplement particularly when analyzing social movements under non-democratic regimes.

Given this Chinese context, we believe that the definitions of "institutional" vs. "non-institutional" means should be quite different from those in western countries. Therefore, the definition and analysis of social movement and political opportunity structure in China will also vary accordingly. In the study of western social movement,

the “non-institutional” means include those legal collective action beyond established structure (such as protest), and those explicitly forbidden by law and regulations (such as blockage of traffic). But in China, many “non-institutional” means could be just those actions which are not explicitly approved by law and regulations. Thus, despite the illegal channels, there are a lot of “gray areas” within the system that can be seen by the authorities as not completely under control or as creating nuisances in their daily routine.

In the creation of political opportunity in social movement, we call the process striving for these “non-institutional” channels or “gray area” as “disturbance within the system”. For instance, in China, the media (especially the official and semi-official media) are still under the control of the government, and often act as the government’s propaganda. So striving for accurate report from the media alone could be regarded as striving for political opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Take another example, even though the “two congress” (The National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) are actually controlled by the Chinese party-state, if the social groups can lobby the delegates to raise motions on behalf of their interests, this seemingly institutionalized means may also generate unprecedented pressure to the authorities and be seen as expanding the political opportunities for the social movement concerned. In view of this, Kitschelt’s argument (1986) of “under a closed political opportunity structure, social movement is more likely to adopt confrontational strategy through non-institutional channels” is somehow a sweeping statement when we look into the collective actions and social movements in China. The question lies on the understanding of “non-institutional” channel. In the Chinese context, “non-institutional” measures could refer to behaviors within established system but exceed the boundary drawn by the state for civil society activities. They could be understood as kind of subtle resistance, but they are usually “non-confrontational” on the surface. Through this manner, collective actions and social movement can find their way to develop in China.

### *Methodology and research method*

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<sup>3</sup> In China, to a large extent, the mass media are still controlled by the government (directly controlled by the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee), especially some official and semi-official media (e.g. China Central Television, Xinhua News Agency, China Youth Daily). They still act as the propaganda of the government. There are also some important media such as South Weekend that have “direct access to the highest authority of the central government” and thus are influential as the high level officials sometimes adjust policy and regulations based on the information provided by them. Therefore, if opinions of NGOs can be heard by the latter media, it actually has an effect of enhancing the openness of the political system. This is a process of striving and producing political opportunity. And the expansion of this kind of chances is also an important product of a movement.

Based on the analysis above, this article will adopt an analytical framework (Ho, 2003) integrating the typology of political opportunity structure suggested by McAdam (1996) and Tarrow (1996) respectively. It emphasizes on the following four aspects of political opportunity structure: the existence of political channel, the stability of political elite strata, the presence of political allies and the state's capacity and propensity for repression. However, this article does not treat these four dimensions as the indicators of political opportunity. Instead, these dimensions provide us different perspectives to look into the dynamic process of how political opportunity is found and defined. Also, when analyzing a movement, political opportunity structure in different stages of the movement (initial stage and developmental stage) will be discussed respectively. We will also take into account the specific political regime, especially the state-society relationship during the analysis.

In this two-year case study, we adopted a number of research methods including action research and participant observation, in-depth interviews, discussion group and textual analysis. One of the authors of this paper has been tracing the Nujiang and Dujiangyan anti-dam construction movements for more than three years and has carried out field study and other research activities with the Beijing and Yunnan NGO circle as well as local communities along Nujiang and Jinsha Jiang. We have developed profound connections with the related environmental NGOs, media, experts, government officials and other interested parties. We have participated in various activities of the movement such as public forum, exhibitions, internet discussion and other meetings. Mutual trust with different movement participants was established which helped acquiring internal documents and conducting in-depth interviews. Textual analysis includes large amount of related media coverage, meeting minutes, emails, legal documents, public statement and petition letters, and notes taken during interview and discussion group.

In accordance with the research theme, our interviewees include the person in charge of NGOs, individual activists, experts, government officials and reporters involved in the coverage of the events. Documents analysis is based on key media reports which are able to indicate the rise and fall of political opportunities and the mood of public opinion (especially the different voices within the central government, stands of Yunnan local government, statements made by both pro- and anti-dam construction parties), related government legislations, minutes and correspondence of NGOs, related petition materials and internal references.

## *Course of Nujiang Anti-dam Construction Events*

### Stage One: Upsurge of the “Nujiang Defense” and the first climax (July 2003 to February 2004)

In July 2003, Nujiang- Lancang Jiang-Jinsha Jiang -- “The Three Parallel Rivers” area -- was approved as World Natural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). But the construction schedule of the large-scaled hydropower cascade exploitation project on Nujiang was also submitted at almost the same time.

On October 14, 2003, the “Report on Nujiang middle and lower stream hydroelectricity construction plan” submitted by Yunnan provincial government was vetted and approved by National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). On August 26, 2003, NDRC hosted a related auditing meeting in Beijing and passed the construction plan regarding two reservoirs and 13-ladder hydropower facilities on Nujiang. However, the officer from the SEPA (State Environmental Protection Administration which was later renamed as Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People’s Republic of China) claimed that the project had not yet undergone environmental impact assessment and therefore refused to sign on the report. This officer then contacted his friend from the environmental activists circle right after the meeting<sup>4</sup>. Both SEPA and environmental activists were aware that it was crucial to protect Nujiang – the “last ecology river in China”. Since then, the Nujiang Anti-dam Construction Movement was unveiled.

With the SEPA taking the helm and environmental NGOs assisting on the sly, expert seminars were held in Beijing and Kunming in relation to the exploitation of Nujiang in September and October 2003. The debate between the “pro-dam group” led by experts from Yunnan and “anti-dam group” led by experts from Beijing was intense. The event soon spread like wildfire through the mass media. Till then, the Nujiang dam construction debate was revealed to the public.

In the following few months, environmental protection NGO and activists started a pressing propaganda wave, spreading the doubts and oppositions in regard to the Nujiang dam construction project through channels such as local and overseas meetings and media. For example, during the International Meeting of Dam Affected People and their Allies in Thailand in late November 2003, environmental groups

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<sup>4</sup> Sources: interview with the environmental activists.

such as “Green Earth Volunteers”, “Friends of Nature” and “Green Watershed” solicited support from more than sixty countries’ NGOs. In the name of the conference, they jointly signed a declaration to show their support in protecting Nujiang. In a letter responding to this issue, UNESCO expressed their concern on Nujiang. The Nujiang dam construction issue was soon spread in global civil society and international community.

Given the vested interest of local governments in developing hydroelectricity in Yunnan, the environmental activists were well aware that they must stop the dam construction project through the central government. During the period of “two congresses” in 2003, they submitted petition and formal motion against dam construction in Nujiang to the State Council through some old friends in the environmental protection circle: a delegate of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a representative of Beijing People’s Congress, a renowned environmental engineer and a famous professor from a top university.

In February 2004, Premier Minister Wen Jiabao commented on the “Report on Nujiang middle and lower stream hydroelectricity construction plan” submitted to the State Council by NDRC: “For large-scale hydroelectricity project which arouses much attention from the society and different opinions in the environmental protection aspect like this one, we should study carefully and make decision based on scientific evidence.” The once on the verge Nujiang project was suddenly held back. This confidential internal instruction spread rapidly in the media as well as the internet. Wen’s comment was soon interpreted as a landmark of success of the Nujiang defense. Related NGOs and anti-dam activists were immensely encouraged. Since then, it was widely believed that it was the pressure of public opinion generated by the advocacy efforts of the anti-dam forces including petition, submission of motion in two congresses, and media discussion that made Wen halt the Nujiang project.

#### Second Stage : The coalition of anti-dam forces and the period of rapid development of the movement (March 2004 – March 2005)

Largely encouraged by the central government, the environmental protection activists immediately extended their battlefield. Yunnan local NGOs promptly arranged a string of mobilizing campaigns targeted at the Nujiang local community:

representatives of the adjacent villages of Nujiang, under the lead of Green Watershed, went to Manwen to inspect on the local resettlement condition. This event has attracted extensive media coverage. After that, the resettlement representatives have took part in a series of NGO organized training and conferences.

Environmental protection NGOs from Beijing and different regions are more united than ever in the light of such event. In late June 2004, environmental NGOs organized various social forces, including the representatives of Nujiang villages, send an open letter to the World Heritage Conference of UNESCO regarding the preservation of the “three parallel rivers” of Yunnan. Public discussion forums on the internet concerning the preservation of the Nujiang and other neighboring rivers have been established, including the renowned Beijing Green Reporter Salon and the newly launched Nujiang Newsgroup. The core network of Nujiang anti-dam forces and the mechanism for propaganda and mobilization gradually shaped up. Some well-known environmental activists such as Wang Yongchen and Yu Xiaogang have become the leaders of the Nujiang anti-dam forces. Some environmentally conscious reporters have become well-known and gradually evolved into a network as a result of reporting the Nujiang incident.

These events at last led to a successful “collective action” in late October 2004 when the United Nations Symposium on Hydropower and Sustainable Development was held in Beijing. With support from the Beijing NGOs and environmental protection network, Green Watershed brought resettlement representatives from the Three Parallel Rivers to attend the forum in Beijing. It is the first time in history that villagers spoke for themselves in such an important international conference. This event has captured the media’s interest, in turn induced higher public concerns and discussions<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the previous media coverage, the focus has shifted from environmental protection to the resettlement issues, and this shift further gained supports from the people who are concerned more about livelihood issue. The Nujiang anti-dam construction alliance thus grew even stronger.

China Rivers Network, the first public initiated organization committed to issues related to rivers in China, was established after the conference. It is formed by NGOs, experts, journalists and activists. A series of anti-dam activities supported or driven by China River Network have taken place a few months after its establishment. These activities included exhibitions, open petition letters and ecology tours. Some activists began to prepare investigation reports and address to the central government once again.

Also at this stage, it can be said that the collaboration between the SEPA and the NGOs has entered the honey moon period. On July 1, 2004, SEPA launched the “Interim Measures for Administrative License Public Hearing System in Environmental Protection”. After the United Nations Symposium on Hydropower, Pan Yue, deputy director of SEPA, announced that in the near future, public hearings will be held regarding controversial large-scaled construction projects. The public could then be involved in the decision-making process. On November 13, 2004, due to the insistence of SEPA on environmental concerns, the pro-dam group failed to make progress in the “Inspection Meeting on Planning and Assessment of Nujiang Area” headed by the NDRC as they expected. Their attempt of rushing the dam construction project faced tremendous obstacle again.

The “Storm of Environmental Impact Assessment” which shocked the country in early 2005, was a critical attack launched by SEPA. On January 18, SEPA announced the termination of 30 illegal construction projects in 13 regions, including the Jinsha River Xiluodu hydropower station project. This is the first time SEPA made such a large number of illegal construction projects public since the “PRC Environmental Impact Assessment Law” was put into practice. This “storm” has greatly encouraged the NGOs, environmental protection activists and residents in the dam areas. Soon after, environmental groups like Friends of Nature, Global Village, Green Earth Volunteer, Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims of the China University of Political Science and Law have joined together to draft an open statement to SEPA, supporting its righteous act. At such stage, co-operations between SEPA and the environmental protection social forces were further consolidated.

### Stage Three: Setbacks and declining momentum of the movement (March 2005 - October 2005)

In response to the upsurge of anti-dam voices in the community, the pro-dam counterpart began their forceful counter attack. With the support of the Yunnan provincial government and the hydropower authorities, a 4-day field study (April 3-7, 2005) at the mid-stream of Nujiang was carried out by a specialist inspection group under the lead of He Zuoxiu, a member of the Chinese Academy of Science, and popular scholar Fang Zhouzi.

During the open forum at the Yunnan University right after the field study, He and Fang strongly criticized the NGO environmental activists as unscientific and claimed

that the dam project was for the overall benefits of the Nujiang community in terms of sale of power and local employment. These claims and arguments soon spread out through the Yunnan official media and disseminated widely on the internet. The stress on people's livelihood and doubt towards the legitimacy and the scientific ground of the environmental NGOs by He and his fellows has put the anti-dam social forces into a truly disadvantageous position.

The pro-dam group has taken up this chance to lobby their plan in the government. Evidenced in July 2005, when Premier Wen Jiabao went to Yunnan for a study trip, local officials expressed the urgency in developing hydropower in Nujiang. Right after the trip, Wen commanded the NDRC, SEPA and related authorities to speed up the researches and draw a conclusion as soon as possible. Internal persuasion seems to yield. Since May, environmental activists got insider sources from the government and media that the Propaganda Department of the CCP Central Committee "ordered" the media and even the environmental protection authorities that "there must not be any negative reports on the hydroelectricity construction projects, especially on the Nujiang dam project". The NGOs were literally silenced by the censored media.

From August to September 2005, the pro-dam construction group published a report titled "Two Academy Fellows Urge President Hu and Premier Wen to Re-launch the Nujiang Project" through Wen Wei Pao. According to the report, He joined Lu Youmei from the Chinese Academy of Engineering, in the name of member of the communist party and fellows of the academy, wrote to the government's highest command, proposing that with some "preservation measures" in place, the state should consider developing hydropower in Nujiang. In this letter, they severely criticized some anti-dam NGOs of having made absurd arguments to mislead the community".

In October 2005, the Yunnan Nujiang local government declared the commencement of Liuku Hydropower Station resettlement plan. Soon after this declaration, on October 23, pro-dam group held the China's Hydroelectricity and Environmental Protection Conference, continuing to promote the dam project. In this stage, the pro-dam party launched a successful counter movement and won a favorable position in public opinion through gaining supports from experts of related fields, opinion leaders as well as from the Central government. They positioned themselves as the spokesmen of the local residents and strengthen their social standing with the "for the people's livelihood" stand through the media. At the same time, the environmental activists were depicted as extreme environmental militants who were anti-scientific and colluded with foreign forces.

#### Stage Four: Rejuvenation and searching for new dynamics (September 2005 to July 2006)

After experiencing several months of setbacks, anti-dam forces made a comeback, and launched a counter attack. In late August 2005, China Rivers Network presented a public statement “Request for disclosure of environmental impact assessment report of Nujiang hydroelectricity development according to law” together with signatures of 66 NGOs and 99 individuals (including renowned experts and opinion leaders) collected, to NDRC, SEPA and other authorities concerned. It demanded public hearing to be held, hoping “a new era of openness, transparency and public participation, regarding policy making in hydroelectricity development and other large-scaled construction projects in China, would begin.” The action touched off severe debates, between parties advocating and opposing dam construction, concerning the disclosure of environment assessment report, and aroused another upsurge on the mass media and the internet, and Nujiang issue was under the spotlight again.

The movement organizers even made use of its own friendly media partnership to enlist support from the public opinion. For instance, an interview concerning dam construction in Nujiang broadcasted by Phoenix Television program “Social Watch” in late October, was supposed to feature pro-dam scholar Fang Zhouzi. Voices of NGOs, however, were inserted through artful arrangement of the flow of the program and eventually favored the anti-dam forces.

In response to the questioning of NGOs’ extreme environmental ideology and the accusation of “sacrificing human rights for animal rights”, Green Earth Volunteers organized a group of volunteers and media to study in Nujiang from the end of 2005 to early 2006. They interviewed about one hundred local villagers, produced a documentary entitled “Silent Nujiang” and a research report “Report on Nujiang Migrants Study”. The study provided evidence for the argument that villagers there were not adequately informed of the development plan and the issues related to their resettlement. Many commented that this action successfully established the image of anti-dam movement as a social force concerning the livelihood of the people.

At this time, the SEPA still played the role of NGOs’ ally in the movement. In November 2005, the SEPA solicited comments from the public towards “Measures of Facilitating Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment’.

Environmental NGOs promptly organized related seminars to express their opinions. On March 18, 2006, “Interim Measure of Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment” was officially in effect. Deputy director of SEPA Pan Yue proclaimed that this was the first code for regulating public participation in environmental protection in China.

On the day this provisional measure was brought into practice, some green activists issued a legal letter to the SEPA, demanding participation in environmental impact assessment of hydroelectricity development in Nujiang, requesting the SEPA to disclose related information and to launch a public hearing. On March 30, the SEPA answered positively and lucidly, “Our administration will follow the regulations of the ‘Interim Measure’ to allow public participation in environmental impact assessment before the construction of hydroelectricity facilities. We will make decisions according to scientific evidence and democratic principle.” Despite the superficial fact that this legal action was directed against the SEPA, it was believed to be a deliberate and unspoken collaboration of both sides to better promote the new measure of public participation in environmental protection.

In this period of time, although the endeavor made by civil society largely twisted the movement’s previous adverse position in public opinion, local governments in Yunnan was accelerating the planning process for the Nujiang project. The situation was still acute. The turning point that created new dynamics for the movement came from the World Heritage Conference of the United Nations. Because the preservation of the Three Parallel Rivers was questioned and warned by World Heritage Conference for two consecutive years, the Conference sent an expert team to investigate the related rivers in April 2006. The green NGOs sharply sensed the opportunity lying around during this investigation. Representative of China Rivers Network successfully gained an opportunity to meet the team in Beijing before they arrived in Yunnan, and reported the dynamics behind the preservation of Three Parallel Rivers and the potential damage to the natural heritage as a consequence of dam construction. The expert team discovered, after their field trip to Nujiang, that the information provided by the local government and what they got from the NGOs were extremely different. Thus, when Yunnan provincial government suggested to redraw the heritage boundary, they quickly realized the problem underneath.

In the 30<sup>th</sup> World Heritage Conference held in July 2006, based on the harsh report written by the expert team, the Conference reached the conclusion that “the Three Parallel Rivers world natural heritage is still under acute threat such as

hydroelectricity development and mining industry”. The Three Parallel Rivers was enlisted to be further scrutinized and was not far from being included in the list of “endangered heritage”. Yunnan provincial government thus received severe criticism from the central government. Spokesperson of Ministry of Construction of China had to once again make a promise to the world, stating “China is a responsible country which will not recklessly destroy natural environment for the sake of short-term economic benefits.”

The decision of the World Heritage Conference was soon spread to the media through the anti-dam experts who participated in the meeting. China Youth Daily and South China Morning Post of Hong Kong reported the news immediately. They used the standing of the United Nations to generate international pressure upon Yunnan and the central governments. Bearing double pressure from central government and public opinion, local government of Yunnan refrained from mentioning dam construction in Nujiang in the following few months. The anti-dam activists claimed this as a major victory and optimistically estimated that 13-ladder hydroelectricity development in Nujiang was no longer possible, and even the 4-ladder development proposal would face enormous difficulty.

Dam construction advocates remained relatively silent afterwards. During which they only spoke to media twice through the Ministry of Water Resources, which had ambiguous stand between hydroelectricity development and ecological protection. Several media reports in late October 2006 stated that Minister of Water Resources Wang Shucheng thought the originally planned 13-ladder hydroelectricity station in Nujiang was a “plundering development”. On March 6, 2007, Wang Shucheng said in an interview that no feasible planning report had been confirmed regarding the development of Nujiang hydroelectricity station, and there was no conclusion on whether to develop or not and how to develop.

Yunnan province did not dare to publicly mention dam construction in Nujiang again until March 2007. Yunnan media reported that China Huadian and Yunnan province party committee had signed a document to speed up hydroelectricity development in Nujiang and middle course of Jinsha Jiang. Nevertheless, Yunnan Xinhua website reported that Yunnan provincial government had declared “not to build power stations, not to develop mines, and to specially protect the ‘Three Parallel Rivers’ region”. Attitude of Yunnan province was mysterious. Insider source said Yunnan government and central government were engaged in a bargaining process to strive a balance between development and preservation.

In the 31<sup>st</sup> World Heritage Conference held in late June 2007, China was warned for the fourth time regarding the preservation of The Three Parallel Rivers. It was resolved that if the situation did not improve within a year, it would be put in the list of World Heritage in Danger, or even be removed from the world heritage. Experts of the United Nations especially requested China to disclose publicly the details of every construction project near the Three Parallel Rivers in time. Until the presentation of this paper, the dam construction plan in Nujiang is still in standstill due to the controversy and the movement to protect Nujiang is still continuing.

### *Analysis of political opportunity structure in different stages of the movement*

#### Political opportunity in the initial stage of the movement

In terms of ‘political channel’, Chinese political system left rather little space for civil society to develop. (Chan, 2005b) In the 1990s, NGOs began to emerge in China and experienced a phenomenal growth afterwards. Up till now, however, the legal and political environment for the NGOs is still very stringent. On one hand, the Chinese state understands that some of these groups can supplement the state in providing social services to the poor and needy. On the other hand, the government is worried that they may turn into an independent political force challenging the regime. These groups find the institutional channels, including party-state structure or official media, rather closed when they attempt to advocate for change such as the appeal for environmental protection. Very often, they need to make use of informal networks to get their voice heard.

Many founders of Chinese environmental NGOs were social elites and renowned intellectuals. Some of them were even advisors of governmental departments, delegates of National People’s Congress (NPC) and member of Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conferences (CPPCC). These NGO were therefore able to gain access to some inside information. Moreover, some environmental appeals were submitted to related authorities through formal motion of NPC and CPPCC or informal personal networks and channels. Some green journalists would also influence decision makers through writing “internal reference”. Although the efforts mentioned above were rather sporadic, diversified political channels, formal or informal, were already in place.

In terms of stability within political elites, the regime was rather coherent in 1990s. Top leaders were committed to the core mission of economic development

while environmental concerns were not granted adequate attention. Nevertheless, the surge of social conflicts due to the rapidly deteriorated environment and increasing social inequality in the past decade has urged the government to rethink its policy priority. From the point of view of state-society relations, the base of legitimacy of the regime has shifted gradually from performance to fairness and equity (including social and environmental justice). The central government, driven by these changes, began to promote some new ideas and policy guidelines such as “Scientific Development Perspective”, “Harmonious Society”, ‘Green GDP’ and “Construction of New Villages”, which eventually clashed with some established interests. These clashes were unavoidable because different concerns and interest appeals were found between different functional branches and levels of the governments. This weakened the coherence of the political elites, and provided room for civil society to sound out their voices. For example, the “first attack” launched by the anti-dam movement was made exactly when some officials in the SEPA disagreed with the NDRC and the local governments. Officials in SEPA decided to enlist support from environmental NGOs to strengthen their position. In a nutshell, the cleavages within and among elites are crucial to the formation of the movement. Making use of these cleavages, environmental NGOs deliberately borrowed slogans promoted by Central Government such as *Green GDP* and *Scientific Development Perspective* to legitimize their struggles with some authorities, particularly local governments of Yunnan.

Concerning the presence of elites ally in our framework, the SEPA has gained unprecedented opportunities for development and shaping the public discourse in recent years. The authority gradually moved away from the previous marginalized position within the bureaucracy as environmental problems had become more imminent and the international community continued calling for environmental protection. Some SEPA officials who had vision and were keen to forge ahead stood out, yearning for opportunity to attain personal values and political achievements through advancing green politics in China. These officials were willing to cooperate with the civil society. As a result, SEPA has become the most important ally of the anti-dam movement. They both found the collaboration in the defense of Du Jiang Yan mutually beneficial and expected equally fruitful result in the defense of Nujiang.

Regarding the state’s capacity and propensity for repression in our framework, the Chinese authoritarian regime undoubtedly possessed enormous capacity to control the activities of civil society. However, because of the advancement of telecommunication technology and the marketization of media, the Chinese state found it more difficult to control the society as before. Civic groups were able to

expand their space of activities and avoid political scrutiny through extensive use of internet. Besides, China was involved actively in the tide of globalization, striving to build an image of a civilized superpower. Pressure from international community was also taken more seriously.

The above analysis of the political opportunity structure and state-society relationship demonstrated clearly that the anti-dam movement in Nujiang was enhanced by the existing political opportunities in its initial stage of formation. The rapid development of civil society, broadening of political channels, partnership with the environmental protection authorities, cleavages within and among political elites, and the declining state capacity and propensity for repression due to globalization and internet technology all contributed to the uprising of the movement.

#### Developmental Stage of the movement: utilization, creation and transformation of political opportunity structure

Different interest groups began to interact when the movement progressed from the initial phase to developmental phase. Political opportunities were produced and twisted when different parties attempted to isolate their antagonists. The movement organizers could not afford to wait passively for political opportunities to come. Especially under an authoritarian regime, the anti-dam movement needed to strategically explore and maneuver the existing political opportunities so as to sustain the movement.

#### **Strategy of civil anti-dam force**

During the developmental stage of the anti-dam movement, the organizers mainly adopted the following strategies for enhancing political opportunity: active establishment of partnership with allies within government, utilization of international pressure, and reliance on the loose but flexible network form of organization to connect participants from different sectors. Analyses of how these strategies enhanced political opportunity were as followed:

In terms of partnership, if the previous partnership between environmental NGOs and SEPA that based on personal relationship was loose and ambiguous, the alliance was then transformed gradually into an relatively stable, open, and even semi-institutionalized after a series of events around the dam construction in Nujiang. One of the examples of this formal alliance is the All China Federation for Environment Protection established under the sponsorship of SEPA. In its board of directors with more than 200 members, apart from the 113 high ranking officials, more

than 30 members were from environmental NGOs including Liang Congjie (Friends of Nature), Liao Xiaoyi (Global Village) and Wang Yongchen (Green Earth Volunteers). Liang Congjie even served as vice president side by side with Xie Zhenhua, former director of SEPA.<sup>5</sup>

Both environmental authorities and NGOs tried their best to support each other in public through media. When SEPA initiated the “storm of environmental impact assessment” in January 2005, it boosted the confidence of the anti-dam NGOs. Deputy director of SEPA Pan Yue repeatedly emphasized in public the importance of having environmental NGOs as their allies. Moreover, only three days after the storm kick-started, 56 environmental NGOs make a joint statement through more than 20 mainstream media organizations to express support to SEPA’s initiative and to state their will of becoming a “closer partner” to the government.

Another notable example is the duet played by SEPA and NGOs when they jointly promoted the “Interim Measure of Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment” as mentioned before. It is crucial for NGOs to support the regulations on environmental impact assessment and the provision for public hearing promulgated by SEPA because these collaborations provided ‘legitimate’ support for both sides. These measures provided legal base for NGOs and the public to engage in related environmental incidents by means of petitions, lawsuits and other collective actions in the name of “public participation”. Simultaneously, SEPA could also ride on these civic engagements as strong indicator of popular demand for environmental protection to compete with other powerful authorities within the government. The dual legitimacy of the environmental NGOs and authorities strengthened both their positions within and without the government and was the key to success in the defense of Nujiang.

For the utilization of international pressure, many environmental NGOs were fully aware that anti-dam movement was extremely controversial, sensitive and new in China while NGOs were still weak and would be difficult to lead a movement on their own. Overseas NGOs had much more anti-dam experiences, ideas and techniques that could be learnt and borrowed. Moreover, due to the censorship in local media, international media was also needed to channel their appeals to the public. As a result, network of international NGOs, international conferences (initially, mainly conferences organized by overseas NGOs) and international media became the major source of international pressure that local environmental NGOs could rely on in the

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<sup>5</sup> Extracts from ‘A Green Alliance’ by Jing Xiaolei in ‘Beijing Review’ (Chinese version).

developmental stage of the movement.

International pressure can be used in two fronts – to exert pressure on Chinese government and even local governments to bring about changes of related policy; it could also weaken the stability of political elites by creating cleavages between central and local governments or different functional departments within the government. For example, the central government was anxious in preserving the status of the related rivers in the World Heritage as it might help build China's international image, but the local governments were less interested in this recognition as compared to the economic benefits the dam projects would bring about.

In the formative stage of the movement, NGOs mainly relied on global civil society to create international pressure. Later on they realized the importance of international organization such as United Nations (particularly its subsidiary organizations such as UNESCO and World Heritage Conference) which had more important political leverage to country like China. For instance, since Nujiang is part of an international river, the environmental NGOs thus mobilized opposition in the lower stream countries to exert international pressure on the central and local government and eventually gained certain degree of success. Chinese State Council spokesperson stated in different occasions that Chinese government would be very prudent when developing hydroelectricity and would take into account the impacts on the countries in the lower stream. In 2006, when Bai Enpei, Party Head of Yunnan Province was interviewed by media of China and other South Asian countries, he also promised: “Yunnan would never damage the environment and bring unnecessary negative impacts to lower stream countries for the sake of developing hydroelectricity.”

Regarding the organization form of the anti-dam movement, the long established Environmental Reporters Salon and later the loosely structured platform such as China Rivers Network were the protocol of self-organized model in today Chinese civil society. Because of their non-embodiment and fluid nature, these networks possessed the characteristics of low cost and low risk. The loose organizational form of the movement networks imposed no specific obligation upon their participants while attracted resources from different sectors, including environmentally conscious officials, delegates of NPC and CPPCC, experts in related fields and media personnel. It was very difficult for this sort of participants to be committed to a formal organization that imposed binding rules on their members. They would, however, be happy to do something meaningful according to their own pace and style, and to

exchange information and other political resources for the sake of the anti-dam campaign. This network form of movement organization greatly facilitated their participation and helped expanding the movement's political opportunities and sources of resources.

For instance, through a network of green journalists and the use of dynamic communication strategies, the movement was able to break the barriers in political channels. To deal with a sensitive issue like dam construction, many sympathetic reporters had to take risk by reporting the news "before too late", i.e., before the anticipated ban issued by the Central Propaganda Department. Sometimes they would still be criticized or even punished for their "political insensitivity". As a result, comparing to the past when Chinese media were not able to report any negative news about dam construction, today the media even started to question about the once forbidden issue of resettlement caused by the Three Gorges dam construction. These notable changes were caused by the efforts of a group of concerned journalists in striving for the expansion of public sphere. Furthermore, the loose network also helped to solicit support from prominent figures in the legislature and other consultative structures to voice out the appeals of the movement. This gradual enlargement of grey zone, in terms of favorable media reports and petitions within the established political structure, was made possible by concerted efforts in a loose and fluid network under the present circumstances in China.

One typical example of how this network may create political opportunity concerns the way Premier Wen's instruction was revealed and circulated. It was supposed to be one of the many internal administrative instructions made by the premier. It could have been just noted or even objected by different government branches and eventually buried in pile of files within the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, some supporter who had access to this internal instruction decided that it should be released to the network of the movement. It was immediately published by a Hong Kong newspaper as the movement supporters believed that a prompt report would preempt counter-attack from the pro-dam forces. Based on this overseas report, the instruction swiftly circulated in the internet and was interpreted as the central government's gesture of disapproving the dam construction. The network deliberately magnified if not maneuvered the meaning of the instruction and eventually provided a legitimate basis for the anti-dam movement. Besides, this news also elevated the political standing of SEPA when the premier's instruction was seen as putting the dam construction project on hold.

## **Counter attacks and counter movement launched by pro-dam party**

In response to the anti-dam movement, the pro-dam counterpart initiated a series of counter attacks that constituted a counter movement. These counter attacks were meant to silent anti-dam voices by tightening up the political opportunity structure.

First of all, reacting to the partnership formed between NGOs and the SEPA, Yunnan provincial government also searched for allies in the Central Government and some prominent scholars so as to generate pressure and capacity for lobby the central government. Notable incident of this strategy was by organizing renowned scholars such as He Zuoxiu and Fang Zhouzi a trip to Nujiang in April 2005. Through systematic coordination of a series of news reports, the anti-dam activists were demonized as extreme environmental militants and the pro-dam forces was portrayed as advocate of people's livelihood. To solicit sympathy and support from the allies in central government, apart from taking the opportunity of persuading Premier Wen Jiabao during his trip to Yuanan, the counter movement also rode on the academic standing of He Zuoxiu to lobby the decision-makers. Yunnan provincial also leveraged on its large tobacco tax income as bargaining chips to enlist support from the central government.

In order to counteract the strategy of mobilizing international pressure, Yunnan government and the hydroelectricity developers deliberately discredit environmental NGOs and related activists as a suspected force colluded with overseas power that attempted to advance "colored revolution"<sup>6</sup>. The aim of this "stigmatization" was to circumvent the anti-dam movement as the worries about "colored revolution" happened to be a soft rib of the central government at that time. Moreover, the pro-dam party began to query the legal status of China Rivers Network and some of the NGOs involved in the movement. Even though China Rivers did not bear severe setback, thanks to its loose and flexible organizational form, the daily correspondence between their members were monitored and interfered to a certain extent. Some local environmental NGOs were given troubles by the authorities during their annual inspection required for renewal of registration with the civil affairs authorities.

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<sup>6</sup> Wen Wei Po reported, 'in April 2005, after a one-week field trip to Nujinag, He Zuoxiu, member of Chinese Academy of Science and Lu Youmei, member of Chinese Academy of Engineering, jointly submitted a letter to General Secretary Hu Jintao, NPC Chair Wu Bangguo and Premier Wen Jiabao, to report the situation in Nujing, and undersigned as 'Communist Party member' and 'member of Academy' ... they worried that an unhealthy force had distorted the reality and misled the public, some 'hip' NGOs used the cover of "environmental protection" to oppose dam construction and hydro-power station, told lies that we had entered an era of dam destruction, and claimed that the worsening of water pollution was caused by dam etc. They created extremely ridiculous public opinion and severely misled the public and society...'

Facing such a counter movement, the anti-dam organizers adjusted their strategies accordingly by firstly utilizing more the pressure generated by international organizations (such as United Nations) rather than global civil society (such as international NGOs and international media) in order to reduce political risk and excuses for the state to suppress their activities. The consequence of this change was that the World Heritage Conference became an annual battlefield between pro- and anti-dam forces. NGOs, sympathetic experts and media networks even viewed this as a regular political channel that could challenge the government and the hydroelectricity developer.

Another obvious strategic change was that the movement changed from its previous “anti-dam” position to striving for “procedural justice and public participation”. This not only avoided the accusation of “extreme environmentalism” and won as much public support as possible to its own side, but could also echo to the regulations and measures heavily propagated by SEPA that enhanced its own legitimacy and the position of their allies within the government.

The battle around dam construction in Nujiang was far from winding up. We could therefore expect both sides of the movement would constantly modify their strategies to enlarge their own political opportunity and to close the opportunity structure of their rivals in order to drive the movement to a favorable direction according to their interest.

### *Conclusion and discussion*

Viewing from political opportunity theory, this article reviewed and analyzed the course of Nujiang anti-dam movement so as to look into what political opportunity existed in China for facilitating the rise and fall of a social movement. This paper adopts a more dynamic view of political opportunity structure that guides us to study how political opportunity is interpreted, enlisted, enhanced or even created by participants during the course of the movement. Followed are some preliminary conclusions and thoughts:

First of all, the case of Nujiang demonstrates the emergence of a political opportunity structure in recent years which is conducive to the formation of social movement in China. This refers to the rapid development of NGOs, functional differentiation within the government, reconfiguration of the base of legitimacy, integration of China into international community, etc. But this political opportunity

structure should not be seen as something “given”. It needs to be recognized, interpreted, maneuvered and even created by the agents of a movement and its counter-movement, if any. Experiences could be accumulated and skills could be refined during the process of the movement. The possibility of creating political opportunities will grow as the movement or counter-movement progresses from initial to developmental stage. In light of this, though we witnessed certain degree of openness in the political opportunity structure that gave rise to the anti-dam movement in China, they should not be seen as structurally determined and thus the future of the movement is still opened.

Secondly, because of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime, patterns of political opportunity structure conducive to collective action or social movement in China are different from those under Western (liberal-democratic) context. In the case of China, the definition of “non-institutional means”, a concept central to the definition of social movement, will be more subtle. It could refer to some actions in the “grey zone” of a system that eventually created disturbance to the status quo. This subtle resistance can take place in regular channels such as official media, NPC, CPPCC and SEPA public hearing, and by means of accurate reporting, motion, petition, signatures campaign and others. In China, striving for political opportunity is always a process of testing the baseline and occupying the “grey zone” of the system. This could be understood as “*disturbance within the system*” -- a tactic that avoids direct confrontation but still poses serious challenge to the status quo. On one hand, this tactic creates space for the development of civil society and social movement in China. On the other hand, since it is operated within the system, it also poses a risk of being “co-opted” into the system and eventually dissolves a movement.

To conclude, by studying the political opportunity structure and state-society relations that gives rise to the anti-dam movement in China, the implications of this study will definitely go beyond the case of Nujiang. First, other social movements in China facing similar political opportunity structure will have equal chance for development. Second, the experiences in expanding and constraining political opportunities by different stakeholders in Nujiang case will be accumulated and learned by agents in other social movements. Third, the political opportunity structure created or expanded in particular movement (in this case, Nujiang) should be seen as part of the outcomes and achievements of the movement. This new structure could be institutionalized and be utilized by other social movement stakeholders.

Finally, analysis of political opportunity and social movement in China will eventually land on the study of China’s state-society relations. Rapid development of civil society (in terms of the number of NGOs) and the emergence of a vibrant

network society (in terms of personal and internet networks); the regime's changing base of legitimacy from performance to harmonious society that created tension within the state; contention, negotiation and even inter-penetration between state (particularly in some departments) and civil society are important changes in the past decade that suggest a new direction of development in China.

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