

WHAT'S BEHIND THE IMPACT: A CASE STUDY OF A CHINESE
PHOTOJOURNALIST'S ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

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ABSTRACT

WHAT'S BEHIND THE IMPACT: A CASE STUDY OF A CHINESE PHOTOJOURNALIST'S ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

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This thesis examines three environmental stories written and photographed by Chinese photojournalist Chen Jie and employs a critical qualitative analysis to research them and present their impact, including government actions and public engagement. Eventually, this thesis explores why these stories received a different response. This thesis is vital for understanding how environmental journalism gained impact in China, which is an under-researched topic. It examines and displays the selected stories and their different impact based on public information and an interview with Chen Jie. A set of assumptions that describes the context of environmental reporting in China was organized to situate this thesis's arguments. Results suggest that the impact of an environmental photo story published during 2014-2015 in China is mainly influenced by four factors, the story and its publisher, public engagement, government engagement, and timing; the importance of the four factors ascends by order of precedence.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
The <i>Beijing News</i>	3
Chinese Photojournalist Chen Jie	6
BIBLIOGRAPHY	11
LITERATURE REVIEW	15
Investigative and Environmental Journalism in China	15
Media Censorship and Reporting on Environmental Problems	18
Environmental Photojournalism	19
Photojournalism in Present-day China	20
Relevant Policies in China	21
Recent Media Censorship in China	23
Set of Assumptions	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY	26
METHODS	33
Information Collection	33
Interview	33
Selecting Stories	34
Translation	35
Online Search	37
Organization	38
Analyzing the Stories	39
Story Structure	39
News Source	39
Page Layout	40
Combination and Narrative	40
Discussion	41
BIBLIOGRAPHY	43
STORY 1: THE DEATH OF THE DESERT	45
Introduction	45
Background	45
Story Structure	48
News Source	50
Page Layout	51
The Impact	53
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65
STORY 2: A HOMELAND THAT CANNOT RECOVER	69

Introduction	69
Background	69
Story Structure	71
News Source	72
Page Layout	72
The Impact	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79
STORY 3: A MYSTERY LIST IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT	82
Introduction	82
Background	82
Story Structure	84
News Source	86
Page Layout	87
The Impact	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY	94
RESULTS	97
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	99
Media Coverage	99
Main Issue Covered	99
News Images	99
News Source	104
News Media's Autonomy and Circulation	104
Public Engagement	105
Government Engagement.....	105
Timing	106
Summary	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109
LIMITATIONS	111

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1.** The “evaporation ponds.” This figure shows the discharged water pits, or “evaporation ponds,” reported by three different Chinese news media successively. Data source: Google Earth’s historical imagery of the Elisi Town (Tenggeli Elisizhen) in October 2013 47
- Figure 2.** A digital copy of the story *Death of the Desert* published on the *Beijing News* on September 6, 2014. Provided by Chen Jie. 51
- Figure 3.** Comparison of three of the edited pictures and the original ones in *Death of the Desert*. Original photographs are provided by Chen Jie. 52
- Figure 4.** Baidu Search Index for the keyword “Tengger Desert” between January 1, 2013, and January 1, 2015. This figure shows two peaks that appeared in the results. One was on September 6, 2014, when the *Death of the Desert* was published; the other was on October 5, 2014, when the media coverage about President Xi Jinping’s direct instructions on the Tengger Desert pollution surged. Data source: Baidu Index (百度指数)..... 53
- Figure 5.** A digital copy of the page layout of *A Homeland that Cannot Recover* published on the *Beijing News* on December 5, 2014. Source: Weibo @摄影师陈杰..... 73
- Figure 6.** Comparison of an edited picture (left) and the original one (right) in *A Homeland that Cannot Recover*. The original photograph was provided by Chen Jie. 74
- Figure 7.** The digital copies of the featured frontpage and page layout of *A Mystery List in An Environmental Impact Assessment Report* published on the *Beijing News* on June 24, 2015. Source: Weibo @新京报, Weibo @这样下去怎么行..... 87
- Figure 8.** The frontpage photo in *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*. This figure shows bulldozers pushing slag into the nearby reeds. Provided by Chen Jie. 88
- Figure 9.** A photograph that captures a villager’s home interior in *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*. Provided by Chen Jie101
- Figure 10.** *Pollution Under the Desert*, an award-winning photograph featured in the *Looking Down the Polluted Earth*. This figure shows scientists and NGO volunteers sampling polluted sands in the Tengger Desert. Provided by Chen Jie.....102
- Figure 11.** From the industrial park to the evaporation ponds, a white glass fiber reinforced plastic sand pipe stretches two miles through the desert and continuously poured untreated wastewater into the evaporation ponds. Provided by Chen Jie.....103

INTRODUCTION

How did a photo essay trigger national-level government actions in environmental protection, or did it? The thesis originates from an inquiry into the power of photojournalism in the digital era, when the circulation of images is enormous and hard to trace. However, the impact of an exclusive investigative story is traceable; that is, how the government or policymakers, media, and the public responded to the reported issue (Protest et al., 1987).

During 2014 and 2015, Chen Jie, a Chinese photojournalist working for the *Beijing News*, published a series of news reports about the pollution in the Tengger Desert, the fourth largest desert in China. His reports were considered a catalyst for a series of environmental protection actions taken by the Chinese government (Beijing News Media Research Center, 2016).

On September 6, 2014, Chen published his investigative report, *Death of the Desert*, in the *Beijing News*. Shortly after, Chen's reports and photos about illegally built pipes crossing the desert and unregulated pits of toxic chemicals provoked government actions that led to a national-level inspection and public interest lawsuits that resulted in an 88-million-dollar reparation bill. Since the release of Chen's first report, President Xi Jinping has made three direct instructions in total towards the Tengger Desert pollution issue, leading to the launch of an investigation that held 24 local government officials accountable within three months. Later, Chen made two more reports to update the government actions, pollution treatment, and non-profit organization actions taken in the Tengger Desert.

The causality between Chen's environmental stories and the impact they provoked is recognized by official institutions in China. In December 2015, Chinese official media China Central Television (2015) gave the CCTV Law Figures Annual Awards to Chen for his efforts and contribution to the exposure of Tengger Desert pollution issue. In the presentation speech,

the CCTV praised him as “the Protector of the Tengger Desert.” The Law Figures Annual Awards are organized and evaluated by the Ministry of Justice of the People’s Republic of China, National Popularizing Law Office, and China Central Television.

As to my knowledge, Chen was the only journalist in China that was using compelling visual components to craft investigative environmental stories and kept provoking government actions to solve the issues he covered in the past few years.

During 2014-2020, Chen has been focusing on environmental reporting and published many influential reports that led to government responses and official sanctions. However, not all his environmental reports have gained such a significant impact as the *Death of the Desert* did.

This study applies qualitative critical analysis on three of the environmental photojournalism reports written and photographed by Chen between 2014 and 2015 to make sense of their different impact under the context of the Chinese government’s tightening media censorship and increasing emphasis on environmental protection. This thesis presents each story with six sections: introduction, background, story structure, news source, page layout, and the impact.

First, this study applies qualitative critical analysis on text and photography of the environmental stories written and photographed by Chen. Second, each report’s impact is researched focusing on the government’s responses and actions for the reported issues. The transcript of an interview with Chen was used to supplement the necessary details. By combining the two qualitative analyses, it can be determined if these reports have different impacts and how they are different from one another. Based on the results, this study explores what factors could have influenced the impact of an environmental story in China.

The purpose of studying Chen's work is to contextualize the investigative journalism and environmental photojournalism practices in China and interpret the impact Chen's reports provoked. The present study provides a preliminary review of how journalism performs its "supervision by public opinion" function, or watchdog function, in China, a country where news media is considered to be strictly censored. Besides, Chen (2018) has claimed that he created visual environmental reports with an intention to make them catalysts for solutions. This study can provide basic knowledge about Chen's reports and lay a foundation for further discussion of how and why Chen managed to reach his goal. As a case study, this study provides ample details on the media-government interaction, agenda-setting, inter-media relationship, and journalists as witnesses in or following environmental stories, which can yield possible research ideas.

The Beijing News

The *Beijing News* is one of the most influential and controversial news media outlets in China and is the first Chinese newspaper co-founded by media groups from different Chinese regions. In 2003, the *Beijing News* was co-founded by two of the largest official organizations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Beijing-based Guangming Daily Group and the Guangzhou-based Southern (Nanfang) Media Group. It is also the first Chinese current affairs newspaper that adopted the shareholding system. Before the *Beijing News*'s foundation, Chinese newspapers reporting about current affairs were publicly owned and operated by the government or party-owned associations. In China, the "shareholding system reform" was essentially a form of privatization. For example, in the mid-1980s, the Chinese government once used "shareholding economic reform" to disguise its trial privatization measures (Ma, 1995). The first Chinese newspaper that adopted the shareholding system was the *Sichuan Sports* (Xinhua News Agency, 1993).

The *Beijing News*'s Chinese name, 新 京 报 (Xīn Jīng Bào), means “New” “Beijing” “Newspaper.” According to the *Beijing News*'s inaugural statement (The Beijing News, 2003), *Responsibility Makes Us Stand Out*, published on November 11, 2003, the *Beijing News* is named after the reference to two newspapers in the past, the *Jingbao* (Peking Press) founded by Shao Piaoping in 1918 and the *New Rhenish Newspaper* founded by Karl Marx in 1848. The *Beijing News*'s slogan was “being responsible for reporting everything” and “being responsible for what we reported.”

While the Southern Media Group is operated at the provincial-level and owns market-orientated news media like the *Southern Weekly*, Guangming Daily Group is a more orthodox and elite-oriented central-level news institution operated directly under the Central Committee of the CCP and managed by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (Central Publicity Department). Therefore, the *Beijing News*, from the beginning, has integrated the political resources from the *Guangming Daily* and the professionals from the Southern Media Group, which made it quickly stand out in circulation and critical journalism. Critical journalism, under the context of Chinese media politics, especially the policy of “supervision by public opinion,” often refers to journalists' oversight over political governance through various forms of journalism practice, including investigative reporting and challenging censorship (Hem, 2014; Repnikova, 2017).

According to the introduction on *Beijing News*'s website (The Beijing News, n.d.), the newspaper was an 88-page daily newspaper with a daily circulation of 7.76 million. In 2010, its advertising avenue reached above 1.4 billion RMB (approximately US\$216 million). After that, however, the print newspaper industry was threatened by the decline in the rate of increase in advertising revenue, which prompted the *Beijing News* to deploy a new media system reform (Li

& Sparks, 2016). On December 17, 2020, the *Beijing News* announced that it would publish only five issues weekly from Monday to Friday, starting in 2021 (Zhong, 2020). According to an interview with Song Ganshu (Qi, 2020), the chief editor of *Beijing News*, the press had only seven staff members in its print newspaper system in 2020; the rest of its employees worked in the new media system. The *Beijing News* had more than 480 content distribution channels on the Internet in 2020. These channels, referring to specific ways or portals the news media uses to distribute its content on the Internet, allow the *Beijing News* to reach an audience of 250 million and a daily flow of more than 500 million.

Apart from the adjustment in its work system, the *Beijing News*'s editorial board and management has gone through several changes, as well. In 2004, the *Beijing News* chief editor Cheng Yizhong, the former chief editor of the *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, was jailed on suspicion of corruption for five months and later released due to "a lack of evidence" ("Guangzhou Nanfangdushibao", 2004). According to the *Washington Post* and the Committee to Protect Journalists, Cheng was targeted for his former paper's aggressive reporting in 2003 on the SARS outbreak and the death of Sun Zhigang, a 27-year-old graphic designer who died in police custody after being detained for failing to carry his temporary residence permit (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2004; Pan, 2004).

In 2005, the *Beijing News* chief editor Yang Bin, deputy editors Sun Xuedong and Li Duoyu, who were all Southern Media Group employees, were dismissed; more than 100 of the *Beijing News* employees went on a strike against the dismissal ("Xinjingbao 100 Yuangong", 2005). The sanction was likely a collective result of the newspaper's continuous bold investigative reporting since its establishment (Fan, 2013; "Xinjingbao Zao Zhengsu", 2006). After the incident, the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* was required by the Central Publicity

Department to transfer its control of management and editorial to the *Guangming Daily*, which thus weakened the *Beijing News*'s ability to report on sensitive issues (Li & Sparks, 2016).

The *Beijing News*'s autonomy and political resources in investigative reporting were further limited in 2010, when the chief editor of the *Guangming Daily* established a censorship group in the *Beijing News*'s newsroom, and in 2011, when the newspaper's regulatory authority downgraded from the General Administration of Press and Publication to the Publicity Department of Beijing Municipal and is now supervised by the latter (Beijing News, n.d.; Li & Sparks, 2016). Later in 2013, the *Beijing News* staff members expressed their opposition against the Southern Weekly Incident, a conflict over media censorship between the propaganda officials and the journalists at *Southern Weekly*, by refusing to print an editorial that harshly criticized the *Southern Weekly* (Chin, 2013; Wong & Buckley, 2013). In 2020, Dai Zigeng, the *Beijing News*'s former publisher (2003-2017) who threatened to resign over the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident, was arrested over charges of taking bribes and confronting censorship. He was expelled from the Communist Party of China and removed from public office (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Chinese Communist Party, 2020; Wong & Ansfield, 2013).

Chinese Photojournalist Chen Jie

Currently, Chen Jie is the chief journalist of the Beijing News. In 1991, Chen enlisted in his hometown, Shitai, Anhui, and served in the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force for five years (Chen, 2017). In the army, Chen won the second-class merit once and the third-class merit twice. In 1997, Chen retired from the army and worked as a photojournalist in local news media where he served. In 2003, Chen participated in the founding of the *Beijing News* and had worked as a photojournalist for the *Beijing News* since the newspaper published its first issue on November 11, 2003. In May 2005, Chen began to work as the deputy editor of the photography

department of the *Beijing News*. In May 2009, Chen became the chief editor of the photography department.

The turning point of his professional career came in May 2014, when he resigned from his administrative job and returned to work as a photojournalist for the *Beijing News*. At that point, Chen turned from a “bystander” to an “intervener” (Chen, 2017). Since then, he has made more than thirty environmental reports. According to Chen, intervening does not mean advocating. Instead, it means more responsibility, especially as an “image intellectual.” Chen coined the term “image intellectual” to express his ideal in combining his self-identification as a professional in image production and his goal of being a public intellectual. Chen (personal communication, March 3, 2020) said:

I feel that journalists must not be limited by the titles of their jobs. Sometimes journalists who are deeply involved in social issues have more resources and a better understanding of the problems. To a certain extent, they self-consciously take the responsibility as public intellectuals.

They might act similar with a writer, a staff in a government agency or a scientist, in participating in the discussion of some topics in society. First, they do their best to promote the popularization of common sense on some issues, then the second is to consolidate their personal understanding of certain issues.

The reason why I call myself an “image intellectual” is that I try to express my goal humbly. I think it needs a higher vision and level to be a public intellectual. First, I make good use of images to publish some public opinion supervision reports. Secondly, I think that in addition to present works and report facts, images have an intervening function,

like Eugene Smith's involvement in the Minamata disease. He was a long-term participant in the case to promote solutions.

Public intellectuals are those who are concerned about public value and universal value, so that society can develop in a healthy, scientific, and democratic direction. Journalists are on the edge of the role because we have a lot of right of speech in society.

When you master the right of speech, it is your choice to make a powerful and real voice, or a fake one. We can raise people's awareness of environmental protection by lecturing, publishing and communicating. For example, receiving awards is also a good way to raise attention on the severity of environmental problems.

Through his in-depth investigations and striking photographs, Chen has aroused both popular and official attention and actions on environmental issues. For example, in 2014, after Chen reported on the Tengger Desert pollution, his report received three direct instructions from General Secretary Xi Jinping, which led to a top-level investigation that caused more than 100 officials to be held accountable (personal communication, March 3, 2020). In 2015, Chen's report on the ecological damage of the Kalamely Nature Reserve in Xinjiang aroused national attention. Regarding the issue, 12 prefectural-level officials and seven county-level officials were held accountable (Chen & Li, 2018). In 2016, Chen's report, *Village by the Cliff*, about children climbing a rattan ladder to reach their school, provoked a great change in the reported village. On the same day the story was published, General Secretary Xi Jinping and Vice Premier Wang Yang delivered instructions about solving the issue. Two months later, the local government invested about 3 million yuan in replacing the rattan ladder with a steel ladder, which ensured the villagers' safety after the construction finished in September 2017. One year later, the governmental and social support in the village's poverty alleviation helped more than 90% of the

villagers out of poverty; there has been a sevenfold increase in the villagers' average income (Ai De Xiao Wu, 2016).

Chen's return came with recognitions from China and all over the world. Since 2014, Chen has won the China Journalism Awards, the top Chinese press awards approved by the Central Committee of the CCP, five times (School of Communication ECNU, 2019). In 2015, Chen won the CCTV Law Figures Annual Awards for his efforts and contribution to the exposure of the Tengger Desert pollution issue (China Central Television Online, 2015). In 2015, Chen won the Journalist of the Year Award of the 6th China Environmental Press Awards, an award created by the China Dialogue and The Guardian to promote fair and objective reporting and to raise the standard of environmental journalism (Liu, 2015). In 2016, Chen's photograph, *Tianjin Explosion*, won the 3rd prize in the General News Singles category in the 2016 World Press Photo Contest (World Press Photo, n.d.). In 2018, Chen was awarded the 7th Hou Dengke Documentary Photography Prize and the 12th Golden Statue Award for Chinese Photography, two of the top Chinese documentary photography awards, each from the field of public and official (Dong, 2020; Hou Dengke Documentary Photography Prize, n.d.).

As a photojournalist, Chen has constantly adopted new technologies and methods to produce news stories as the media environment changes. In 2015, Chen began to use a DJI drone to take news photographs. In 2016, Chen had Liu Min, another chief journalist of the *Beijing News* join him in investigative reporting. In their partnership, Chen focused more on visuals and Liu focused on writing stories (Hou Dengke Documentary Photography Prize, 2019).

In April 2018, Chen founded the *Beijing News*'s Jie Chu (means "produced by Chen Jie") Studio to improve the quality of their investigative visual journalism and the short-video news that can spread on online video platforms. For example, a three-minute short-video news story,

created by Chen's team and published by the *Beijing News's* We Video on the Miaopai video platform, about the reappearance of pollution in the Tengger Desert attracted more than 7 million views (We Video, 2015). Dating back to 2014 and 2015, Chen's work was mostly distributed through the *Beijing News* printed newspaper, the *Beijing News's* social media accounts, and featured online news media like Tencent News. The stories Chen and his partners created since then can now reach audiences through more distribution channels, including the *Beijing News's* mobile apps and online video platform accounts. Meanwhile, according to Chen's communication on Weibo, he is in partnership with Sony and has used many of Sony's cutting-edge prototypes in his practice, including digital cinema camera, like FX6, and lens, like FE 35 mm F1.4 GM (Chen, 2021).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Investigative and Environmental Journalism in China

Despite sophisticated controls, the policy of “supervision by public opinion 舆论监督” allows media criticism to exist and be influential in China (Chen, 2017). The phrase “supervision by public opinion” is a unique phrase that originated from China’s media environment and first implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1980s, referring to a system of criticism made by the public or media to supervise the government or enterprise actions (Cheng, 2010; Ding, 2003; Li, 2017). Regarding the complexity of the policy, Ding (2003) believed that “supervision by public opinion” is more of a multilevel social and ideological movement system, which entails criticism, inspection, and early warning by supervision, than solely a social behavior. Based on case studies and in-depth interviews with Chinese journalists and government officials, Repnikova (2017) characterized the relationship between the party-state and the critical journalists in China as guarded improvisation. Instead of a steady “suppress-stand against” relationship, *guarded improvisation* means that the two groups are always in a dynamic of breaking the old regulations and compromising the demands of each other. Therefore, news stories can expose and criticize the misconducts of the government or enterprise, and the government is obligated to respond to news media criticism. For instance, since Chen’s report on the Tengger Desert pollution published was in September 2014, President Xi Jinping has made three direct instructions on the report, leading to 24 officials being held accountable in three months.

In regard to journalists, investigative journalists and environmental journalists in China have similar goals in interpreting policies and in-depth content. A national survey on investigative journalists in China, conducted by Zhang & Cao (2017), suggested that Chinese

investigative journalists valued their roles of “reporting reliable information to stop the spread of misinformation,” “provide explanations for complex issues and government policies,” and “practice the supervision by public opinion” (p. 30). Similarly, Lu et al. (2020) conducted a national survey of 104 Chinese environmental journalists and found that they perceived “avoid reporting unproven issues” and “providing in-depth coverage and analysis” (p. 92-93) as their two most important responsibilities.

It is important for Chinese journalists to avoid risks. This may explain why these two groups of journalists value journalistic objectivity and avoid reporting the unproven issue. Based on interviews, Bai (2012) suggested that Chinese investigative journalists showed a tendency to turn from advocacy to neutrality; some considered objectivity as a method to reduce the risks brought by muckraking. Considering the news reporting in China would often be obstructed by external control factors, Bai proposed that such a turn might be because the investigative journalists in China try to borrow the western norms to practice their ideal journalism. In this case, objectivity becomes what Tuchman (1972) proposed, a *strategic ritual* to protect journalists from possible risks. Bai’s study also shows that, compared with being neutral disseminators of information, the Chinese investigative journalists’ role perception was inclined to be more adversary, questioning the authority of the government and other powers. Similar with Bai’s findings, Tong (2015) interviewed 15 Chinese environmental journalists and suggested that the norm of objectivity is a strategy for them to gain more journalistic authority and political safety when covering environmental problems. Therefore, the turn from advocacy to objectivity among Chinese journalists was comparable to the turn to advocacy journalism among western journalists. That is to say these journalism practitioners believed that there was a need to negotiate their former norms with an opposite principle or methodology.

However, although the space for supervision by public opinion exists, there may be very few journalists who will produce investigative journalism content. According to a series of national surveys (Zhang & Cao, 2017; Zhang & Shen, 2011), the number of investigative journalists in China has been decreasing rapidly, from 334 in 2010-2011 to 175 in 2016-2017. The cause of such rapid reduction is multi-faceted. First, Chinese traditional news media faced serious economic pressure from the market. According to the Report on Development of China's Media Industry (Cui et al., 2019), the Chinese newspapers industry's gross annual advertising and publishing revenue shrank from \$8.83 billion in 2008 to \$2.76 billion in 2018. Therefore, many newspapers were forced to cut down their investigative reporting department and reduce the budget for investigative reporting. Second, various levels of the Chinese government have strengthened their administrative control in news reports about sensitive social problems. According to the new national survey on Chinese investigative journalists (Zhang & Cao, 2017), the group reported facing more administrative control from outside the organization and higher pressure from their supervisors inside the organization compared with six years earlier, which lowered their autonomy in reporting. Third, investigative journalists are no longer the main practitioners of supervision by public opinion because traditional news media's authority to influence agenda setting is challenged by emerging social media, which may have limited their reports' impact. Apart from these, low salary and high risk might also contribute to such dramatic change.

Therefore, this thesis aims to inquire whether investigative journalism about environmental issues in China can provoke government actions to solve the issues under sophisticated media censorship and pressure from the market.

RQ1: After Chen's environmental stories were published, what and how did the government take actions to solve the reported environmental issues?

Media Censorship and Reporting on Environmental Problems

Recent studies have suggested that media censorship in China is selective and fragmented at different government levels. Through interviewing professionals, Li (2018) found that Chinese censors tend to censor information that challenges the Party's leading role rather than information that challenges the government's performance. Such tendency in censorship, according to Kuang (2018), coexists with a structural difference between different levels of government: compared with their central-level counterparts, the local propaganda authorities tend to focus more on censoring news that is harmful to social stability and the image of the local government. Localism may explain such differences. For example, local leaders' goals in promotion might incentivize them to cover up negative news within their jurisdictions (Tai, 2016).

Therefore, the local and central governments could have different attitudes towards investigative journalism on environmental problems. A framing analysis by Tong (2014) of such a genre of reports showed that these reports tend to challenge the discourse of economic modernization, which was endorsed by the government and indicated that environmental problems were necessary for economic development. Tong (2014) suggested that the central government may show positive reception for media coverage of environmental problems as it can help convey the authority's assurance to handle those issues. However, the "economic first" discourse Tong used as a hypothesis might have shifted due to the Chinese government's increasing emphasis and actions in environmental protection in the past six years. During such shift, it is possible that many local governments still hold the "economic first" discourse while

their central counterparts do not. While media censorship's details are hard to trace, this case study can inquire if there are differences among the actions taken by different levels of government. Furthermore, what might be the relationship between such difference and the related environmental story's impact.

RQ2: After Chen's environmental stories were published, how did the local government and central government respond differently towards the reported environmental issues?

Environmental Photojournalism

In this thesis, the word environmental photojournalism refers to the representation of environmental issues through the medium of photojournalism. Compared with environmental photography, environmental photojournalism is a smaller field of study with less literature. At the same time, it might be ambiguous to discriminate between environmental photographer and environmental photojournalist. For example, while many editors consider Natalie Fobes a nature and wildlife photographer, Fobes (2002) conceived of herself as a photojournalist "whose work explores the increasingly complex relationship between people and the environment," which was also her definition for an environmental photojournalist.

It's often hard for photographers to capture the relationship between pollution and its effect due to the invisibility of contaminants (Peeples, 2011, 2013). For example, when Eugene and Aileen Smith (1975) were documenting Minamata Disease, they presented the visual evidence of mercury pollution through the bodies of the victims, the pollution source (discharging pipe), and the bodies of the pollution (Chisso Corp. staff). In contrast, they presented the contaminant, mercury, more through a scientific article featured at the end of their publication, *Minamata*. As a result of the invisibility of pollutants, photojournalists who focus on environmental topics, like Chen, may deliberately choose subjects that are easier to present

through visuals, such as heavy metal pollution with unique colors and a sewage pipeline built across the desert.

Photojournalism in Present-day China

Recent English language studies about photography in China have covered the topics of photographic history (Moore, 2020; Poborsa, 2018; Taylor, 2019; Wu, 2016; Zhou, 2018), propaganda images (Bellinetti, 2018; Pittwood, 2017), documentary photography practice regarding urbanization and contemporary art (Ortells Nicolau, 2015; Wang, 2015), and case studies of individual's practice (Liu, 2019; Ng, 2019). There is, however, relatively only a small amount of literature about photojournalism in mainland China and these articles were mostly about photojournalism in the 20th century. Scholars have researched the development of photojournalism before the country's establishment (Brown, 2012), during the cultural revolution (Feng, 2009), and the first 20 years following China's economic opening (Kenney, 1987; Li, 2012, 2018).

In more recent studies, Zhang (2015) examined how Chinese photojournalists documented war conflicts and found that they were influenced by western photojournalism aesthetics, as well as internal political and organizational constraints. Li (2020) organized the early history of how Chinese photographers interacted with and were influenced by the west. Chase (2020) suggested that the editors of *China Weekly* magazine have been using environmental-themed photojournalism to communicate its environmental advocacy values in the past three years, which might better avoid conflict and direct confrontation with the Chinese government. Such a viewpoint aligns with Chinese environmental journalists' emphasis on avoiding reporting on unproven issues and investigative journalists' emphasis on neutrality.

Relevant Policies in China

Government actions on environmental protection provoked by the *Death of the Desert* come under the context of the Chinese government's efforts in pushing forward the national policies regarding Ecological Progress, Combat Corruption, and Rule of Law, which were three of President Xi's political goals (Xi, 2014).

During the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, Xi Jinping brought up the "Thought on Ecological Progress" and listed environmental issues as one of the five priorities of the government. In a speech at the sixth group study session of the Political Bureau of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2013, Xi (2018) said:

Our efforts for ecological conservation and environmental protection will benefit future generations. We must be aware that it is a pressing and difficult task to protect the environment and control pollution, and that it is important and necessary to advance ecological progress. We must take a responsible attitude towards our people and future generations, be resolute in controlling environmental pollution, strive to usher in a new era of ecological progress and improve the environment for our people to live and work in.

Ecological progress is of vital importance to the future of the nation and the well-being of its people. The 18th National Congress of the CPC listed ecological progress along with economic, political, cultural and social progress as the five goals in the overall plan for the cause of Chinese socialism, vowing to promote ecological progress to build a beautiful China and achieve lasting and sustainable development of the Chinese nation (p. 394).

In 2015, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported that Xi had mentioned *ecological progress* more than 60 times in public since the 18th Party Congress (“Shibada yilai”, 2015). Starting at the end of 2015, the central government has sent eight provincial-level inspection groups to supervise local environmental protection and policy implementation. Until the end of the inspection, the groups have promoted the resolution of 150,000 reported public cases, fines amounting to 2.46 billion yuan (approximately 386 million dollars), and administrative and criminal detentions of 2,264 people (Gao, 2019). In 2018, the concepts of Green Development, Beautiful China, and Ecological progress were written into China’s constitutional law. Therefore, environmental issues have become unprecedentedly crucial to politics and society in China.

Also, following the conclusion of the 18th Party Congress, a far-reaching campaign against corruption began in China. In a speech on January 22, 2013, President Xi (2014) proposed that power must be “caged” by the system and vowed to crack down on “tigers and flies,” which means his determination of investigating corrupted officials in all ranks of the party. According to the annual reports released by the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (2019, 2020, 2021), the number of investigation cases to hold party members accountable has been steadily climbing: 172,000 in 2013, 226,000 in 2014, 330,000 in 2015, 413,000, 527,000 in 2017, 638,000 in 2018, 587,000 in 2019, and 618,000 in 2020.

Meanwhile, following President Xi’s promise of developing a “law-based country,” laws regarding environmental protection have been largely revised and implemented since 2012. For example, on April 24, 2014, China revised its Environmental Protection Law for the first time in 25 years. The new law not only increased the penalties for polluters but also clearly regulated Public Interest Litigation for the first time. And three of the most influential environmental policies in China, the Pollution Prevention Action Plan for Air, Water, and Soil, were each

released in 2013, 2015, and 2016 and aimed to provide law as a basis for environmental protection.

Recent Media Censorship in China

Media control is a foundation of authoritarian rule in China, which helps maintain the ruling status of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and deter collective expression (Chen, 2017; King et al., 2013; Shrink, 2011). After implementing the Open and Reform policy in 1978, the government allowed newspapers, magazines, and radio stations to compete in the marketplace and commercialize, which resulted in news media's increasing supervision reports (Shrink, 2011; Wang, 2009). Entering the 21st century, the reach of the Internet and social media platforms, like Weibo, created disruptions in media censorship by providing a public sphere for users to express opinions on social and political issues, which can sometimes exert sufficient pressure for the government to respond and promote policy change (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Chan et al., 2013; Hassid, 2012; Tong & Zuo, 2014). According to the 2015 annual report of Cyberspace Administration of China (2016), the traditional media's ability of agenda-setting has been weakened and replaced by the online media, especially Weibo and WeChat. Meanwhile, social media like Weibo make organizing collective action possible, including the public's active engagement in environmental issues (Huang & Sun, 2014; Sun et al., 2017; Sun & Huang, 2020).

Nevertheless, after years of disruption, media censorship is tightening. In a speech at the News and Public Opinion Work Conference on February 19, 2016, President Xi Jinping proposed that "all news media run by the party must work to speak for the party's will and its propositions and protect the party's authority and unity" and "news media must insist on positive reporting" (Li & Huo, 2016). President Xi's statement marks the relationship between the party and the news media in China. Along with shrinking press freedom, the establishment of a new

institutional framework for Internet governance followed (Creemers, 2017). Yang (2016), the president of the *People's Daily* at the time, published an article that further explained President Xi's speech further disseminated and stated that "if the party cannot manage the new media, the principle of 'party leads media' will be a vacuum on the Internet." Later in 2017, the Cyberspace Administration of China (2017) published a new rule stating that no website or social media account is allowed to provide news service on the Internet without the "qualification of gathering and editing news," which should be issued under the administration's permission. For example, the Curious Daily, an online news outlet with more than 1 million monthly visitors at its peak, was suspended in 2018 because of lacking the "qualification of gathering and editing news" (Cyberspace Administration Office of Shanghai, 2018).

Set of Assumptions

Based on the literature review, a primary set of assumptions to examine the media politics of environmental reporting in China can be established. In this study, the discussions on the stories' impact and the factors that influence the impact would be argued upon such a set of assumptions.

This set of assumptions consist of five hypotheses. First, as the importance of environmental protection increased in the Chinese government's official discourse, the government might be more tolerant of critical environmental reporting. Second, Chinese critical journalists hold a "counter-hegemonic" discourse in environmental reporting, which means they wrote against the capitals and the hegemony of economic modernization (Tong, 2014). Third, the party-state and the critical journalists acted under a relationship characterized as "guarded improvisation," in which the latter were allowed to criticize the government under the system of supervision by public opinion and keep probing the bottom line of media censorship (Repnikova,

2017). Fourth, when it comes to environmental issues, the lower the government level, the more likely it is that the local government would adopt localism in action, which means it might protect or avoid harshly punishing the polluters. This hypothesis is derived from the hypothesis that the local officials are often incentivized by the need for better economic performance within their jurisdiction (Tai, 2016). Fifth, the principle of the party-state's media censorship system is to maintain the party's leading role (King et al., 2013).

Together, these hypotheses imply that the critical environmental reporting in China may not be in conflict with the media censorship system as the pro-economic modernization discourse it challenges is reconciled by the increasing priority of *ecological progress* in Chinese politics. In such a case, the local government's forces on various aspects, including media censorship and news media's advertising revenue, would become the main source of the pressures faced by news media.

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METHODS

Information Collection

The present study researched the environmental stories and their impact. Therefore, this study starts with collecting information that lays the foundation for further research. The information collection consists of four steps, interview, selecting stories, translation, online search, and organization. There was no specific order for the completion of each step.

Interview

An 80-minute-long interview with Chen was conducted on March 3, 2020. The transcript of the interview was used to provide necessary details across this thesis.

The interview was designed based on several factors that may influence an individual's environmental journalism practice as shown in previous studies, including role perception (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2013), source use (Takahashi et al., 2017), knowledge (Van Witsen & Takahashi, 2018), and visual (Doyle, 2007).

Role perception. (1) "From bystander to intervener" (Chen, 2017) is an essential change in your professional career, will "intervening" influence news objectivity? (2) What do you think of your social role as an environmental journalist? (3) How do you define your role as "Image Intellectual" (Chen, 2018)? (4) What do you mean by "environmental reporting should start with the puzzles, focus mainly on the solutions, and be able to promote for a change" (Chen, 2018)?

Source use. (1) What do you think of the importance of citing different sources in environmental reporting?

Knowledge. (1) How did your accumulated environmental knowledge help you to report on environmental issues?

Visual. (1) When it comes to the limitation of images, why do you say that “the expression of images is too simple” (Chen, 2018) in environmental reporting? (2) In the last few years, you have included more videos in your reporting. What do you think of the effect of developing technology on environmental reporting?

Apart from these factors, the interview involved several questions that attempted to verify the impact of *Death of the Desert* and the use of images as evidence in lawsuits.

The interview was conducted through WeChat’s voice call feature and recorded with an external recorder. The recording was transcribed to Chinese transcript through paid transcribe service provided by Iflyrec, a Chinese company focusing on voice-to-text products. I proofread the whole Chinese transcript and translated the selected content into English. The method of translation was detailed in the “translation” section.

Apart from this interview, Chen has published many articles and talked about his environmental journalism practice in public. These materials would also be cited to supplement necessary details.

Selecting Stories

The selected stories came from three of the investigative environmental stories written and photographed by Chen between 2014 and 2015, including (1) *Death of the Desert*; (2) *A Homeland that Cannot Recover*; (3) *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*. *Death of the Desert* was about the illegal discharge of polluted water in the Tengger Desert, one of the biggest deserts in China—a top-level investigation followed (Chen, 2014a). *A Homeland that Cannot Recover* pictured a village poisoned by the pollution from an aluminum enterprise, leading to severe health risks among villagers and laborers—a regional level investigation followed (Chen, 2014b). *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment*

Report questioned that the local government, local environmental protection agency, and an enterprise had participated in faking the opinion poll in an environmental impact assessment report—no related investigation followed (Chen, 2015).

The three stories from 2014 and 2015 were chosen mainly for five reasons: (1) They are likely to have a different impact regarding the different level of investigation the issues received; (2) They all involved illegal discharge of pollution; (3) The *Beijing News* started its new media structural reform in 2014 and had only 11 out of more than 1100 staff members working on newspaper content in 2019. Therefore, 2014 and 2015 were two of the last years when they were still devoted to printed content, which justifies this study to analyze only the printed copies; (4) In 2014, Chen resigned from the *Beijing News* editorial board to work as the *Beijing News* Chief Journalist. Therefore, 2014 and 2015 were two of the first years when Chen began his new journalism practice, which minimizes the difference in writing and photographic style between the stories; (5) It is relatively easier to observe these reports' impact because it has been six to seven years since they were published.

Translation

The writing of this thesis involves time-consuming and complicated translation work because most of the sources this thesis cited were in Chinese. Out of concern in the translation's congruency, the author alone completed all the translation work. While the three selected stories were completely translated, most of the cited sources' content would only be translated when they were cited.

The translation consists of three steps, draft and rewrite, verification of phrases, and final combination.

(1) Draft and rewrite. The Chinese text was quickly translated to English by Google Translate or me. Then I would rewrite the sentence and use Grammarly, a grammar checking tool, to double-check the sentences.

(2) Verification of special phrase. The Chinese text often contains special phrases, like phrases in environmental science or names of Chinese government institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to find an accurate English translation for the original Chinese phrases. In most cases, I used Reverso Context, an online dictionary based on bilingual texts, to locate one or several corresponding English translation(s) of a Chinese phrase. Depending on the original Chinese phrases, I used various sources, including news sources, academic journals, and official sources, to confirm an accurate English translation. For example, the *China Daily*, an English-language daily newspaper owned by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party, has an online column named “Language Tips,” where the official translation of Chinese government institutions could be found. Therefore, for a faster check, I often search “Chinese phrase + site: language.chinadaily.com.cn” to locate a translation sample. Similarly, I could also search “Chinese phrase + site: gov.cn” because Chinese government institutions would often display their English translation on the top of their official website. The accuracy of a translation could be further examined by searching the translation in Google Scholar, which could confirm if the scholars use the translation in academic writing. It is recommended to build a translation codebook to keep congruency. The typical format of the codebook is “original Chinese phrase, English translation, source(s) of the translation,” like “政府信息公开条例, Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Open Government Information, Yale Law School.”

(3) Final combination. In this step, the translation retrieved from step (2) would be placed in the draft produced from step (1). The corresponding sentence would be rewritten if necessary.

Online Search

This study displays the impact of each story through researching how the reported environmental issues unfolded after the story was published. Therefore, the goal of this step was to provide a timeline that forms the narrative of each story's impact.

Primarily, I traced how the *Beijing News* followed up each story by reviewing the related news in the *Beijing News* electronic newspaper database (<http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/>). For example, searching on the website using terms [“腾格里沙漠 tenggeli shamo” (Tengger Desert)] or [“沙漠污染 shamo wuran” (desert pollution)] for the *Death of the Desert* story. As the *Beijing News* would report how the government reacted to its stories, a primary timeline could be formed after an examination on the *Beijing News*'s follow-up reporting.

Then I focused on the government's actions in response to each story's covered issue and other news media's coverage and commentary on each issue. On one hand, I searched related terms on various search engines, including Google, Baidu, and Sogou, to retrieve other news media's reportage and commentary. According to the Stat Counter (u.d.), Baidu and Sogou were two of the most popular search engines in China, each shared approximately 74% and 18% of the online search market in China in 2021. For another, noting that many Chinese news media's articles are not directly featured in these search engines, I searched related terms on the database of various Chinese news media, like the *People's Daily* and the *China Environmental News*.

Official news sources in China are essential in this study as they are considered to be mouthpieces of the government and can represent viewpoints of the government institutions behind them (Stockmann, 2011). For example, the *Xinhua News Agency* communicates messages from the State Council of The People's Republic of China; the *People's Daily* communicates messages from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party; the *China*

Environmental News communicates messages from the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Among them, the *Xinhua News Agency* had a particularly strong official orientation in climate change journalism (Comfort et al., 2019) and can set agenda for other news outlets (Tolan, 2007). But the official media might not be dominant. For example, earlier research suggested that online news outlets in China might be able to voice differently through their reciprocal intermedia agenda-setting (Guo, 2019). Therefore, it was also crucial to include the source from market-orientated news media, the counterparts of the official ones.

Besides, it should be noted that the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China, which was often referred to in this thesis, was re-organized to form the Ministry of Ecology and Environment in 2018.

Apart from “what happened after the story was published,” I also attempted to research “what happened before the story was published.” If there was no previous reporting, then Chen was the first to report on the issue; if there was previous reporting, the differences between Chen's stories and the previous stories might help make sense of the impact of Chen's stories.

Organization

I used Notion (notion.so), an all-in-one workspace, to organize the collected information. Each online source's publishing date, title, author(s), and publisher were typed in a Notion tab and arranged by the order of publishing time. To facilitate revisiting, I inserted each source's address as a hyperlink on the text of the source's displayed title.

I then transferred each source into a “toggle list” on Notion. The “toggle list” allowed me to view the timeline quickly as it can hide and show content inside. In the hidden “toggle list,” I could leave my comments and write a summary of the article. By this step, the collected

information has formed a timeline of how the reported issue unfolded, which could be edited and picked up at any time.

Analyzing the Stories

In this step, each report's news sources, story structure, and page layout of its newspaper print were examined.

Story Structure

The purpose of analyzing the story structure was to allow the thesis's audience to have a sense of the story's content, writing, and the way Chen approached the story's subjects. The story structure was divided based on a story's section titles and written as summaries of each section.

News Source

News source diversity might influence the news story's balance and the credibility of risk stories (Cozma, 2006). Regarding news source, this study focuses on the diversity of the interviewee and categorizes the interviewee into official source, professional source, industry source, and civilian source. The official source refers to government officials, like village cadres and officials working for environmental authorities. The professional source refers to people who show expertise when they appeared in a story and such expertise was a part of their job, like lawyers and college professors. The civilian source refers to those who do not fit into the other categories, like the villagers.

According to Chen (personal communication, March 3, 2020), a good and flexible use of sources, especially professional and expert sources, is fundamental for compelling environmental reporting.

Page Layout

In this step, the page layout and news images that appeared in each story's newspaper print were described and examined. The description of page layout and each photograph was based on Rose's (2016) proposed methodology of compositional interpretation. First, the newspaper print's arrangement of text and photographs was described and further interpreted by asking "why did the editor arrange the print in this way." Second, the photographs were looked at separately using the same methodology. The displayed photographs were compared with the original ones to find traces of editing.

By sorting out the characteristic of page layout, the commonality of the arranged photographs, and the editing conducted on photographs, I can interpret the editor's motive in arranging a page layout, such as placing the audience closer to the pollution scene or showing evidence of the pollution's subtle poisoning effects.

Combination and Narrative

Eventually, this thesis presents each story with six sections: introduction, background, story structure, news source, page layout, and the impact. Overall, the narrative of each case was developed based on each case's timeline and how each case unfolded.

The introduction section aims to provide a brief of the story, which summarizes each story's length and content. The background section provides geographical, economic, or cultural contexts that could situate each case and help make sense of each story's impact. The story structure, news source, and page layout sections show the results of "Analyzing the Stories."

In particular, the impact section was written based on a historical research approach and the results of "Information Collection." The narrative of each story's impact was organized out of an attempt to answer several questions, "what did the government say and do", "how did local

government and central government act differently,” and “how did various news media comment or discuss the reported issue.”

Discussion

The first two steps of analysis were combined to discuss if these reports have different impacts and how their impact is different from one another. Four factors were summed up by cross comparing each case’s differences and commons. In the end, this study discusses how these factors might have contributed to or limited the impact of an environmental story in China.

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STORY 1: THE DEATH OF THE DESERT

Introduction

On September 6, 2014, the *Beijing News* printed the *Death of the Desert*, on its Witness Column, page A12-13. The exclusive story is short in length. Including the text and seven photo captions, the story's word length is 2,069 characters in Chinese and 1,029 words in English after translation. Written and photographed by Chen, the story unfolds as Chen's investigation developed near an industrial park, which at first probed the polluted desert and then turned to the groundwater crisis caused by the industrial park's unregulated exploitation.

The *Beijing News* portrayed the story as a catalyst for a national environmental protection campaign. And there is no denying that the story did provoke great impact. First, after President Xi Jinping gave a written direction on the report, the State Council established a workgroup to supervise the local government to conduct investigation, pollution treatment, and accountability inquiry regarding the pollution issues. Second, in the name of preventing similar pollution, the Chinese government started a national-level campaign in archiving and inspecting all industrial parks and polluting firms. Third, an environmental NGO in China filed environmental public interest litigations against eight enterprises involved in polluting the Tengger Desert. One of the cases the NGO filed was later re-published by the Supreme People's Court in China as a guiding case for all similar cases.

Background

Covering around 14,900 square miles of arid land, the Tengger Desert is located in the southern edge of the Gobi Desert and the junction of three northwestern Chinese provinces, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Ningxia. While most of the desert is administered by the Alxa League, Inner Mongolia, the Tengger Desert is co-administered by the city governments of Wuwei,

Gansu, in its south and Zhongwei, Ningxia, in its west. The pollution site reported in the *Death of the Desert* was near the Elisi Town, Alxa League Left Banner, Inner Mongolia, which bordered with the Zhongwei city.

Shortly after the China Western Development Program, a national policy implemented in 1999 to address the regional inequality in economic development (Lai, 2002), started, the Inner Mongolia Tengger Industrial Park and the Ningxia Zhongwei Industrial Park were each built in 1999 and 2007 to develop the local economy. According to the *Times Weekly*, in 2010, the Tengger Industrial Park gained a gross production value of 1.159 billion yuan and contributed a fiscal revenue of 52.52 million yuan; the local government depicted it as “an industrial miracle” (Yan, 2011).

However, the promising revenue brought by the Western Development Program comes with a price: pollution. Wu et al. (2017) analyzed the polluting manufacturing firms built between 2006 and 2010 in China and found that they were “moving west,” showing a pattern of moving from the eastern to western provinces where there were more lax environmental mandates. The industrial parks in the Tengger Desert were not exceptions.

Before the *Death of the Desert* provoked national attention in 2014, many news media had reported on the Tengger Desert’s pollution issue. In April 2011, the *Time Weekly*, a news magazine operated by the Southern Media Group, reported that the Meili Paper, an industrial plant in the Zhongwei Industrial Park, was flagrantly pouring polluted water in the desert (Song et al., 2011). “Report whatever you want, it is none of our business,” said Wang, the Zhongwei city environmental protection bureau’s deputy director, in the *Time Weekly* article. According to Wang, the industry had just passed the bureau’s recent inspection.

In December 2011, the *Time Weekly* reported that the Inner Mongolia Tengger Industrial Park had never put its water treatment plant, which cost the local government over 5 million dollars to build, into operation (Yan, 2011). Regarding the issue, the park official said to the *Time Weekly* that it was because the wastewater collection rate of the entire park was too low, which was lower than 5%. According to the official, the vast wastewater pits in the desert, which were later reported in the *Death of the Desert*, were “evaporation ponds” (Figure 1) for pollutant extraction—the industries would pour wastewater in the pond, wait for the sun to evaporate the liquid, and then treat and recycle the pollutant as solid waste.



Figure 1. The “evaporation ponds.” This figure shows the discharged water pits, or “evaporation ponds,” reported by three different Chinese news media successively. Data source: Google Earth’s historical imagery of the Elisi Town (Tenggeri Elisizhen) in October 2013

In March 2013, the China Central Television (CCTV), a Chinese state-controlled broadcaster, covered the “evaporation ponds” in its noon news and depicted them as “a black lake rising in the desert,” which led to a provincial-level government action that demanded the polluters to stop production until fulfilling the water treatment standards (“Alashanmeng Jiji

Caiqu”, 2013). As a result of the government response to the news coverage, 15 industrial plants were temporarily closed.

Nevertheless, in September 2014, the *Beijing News*, again, reported on the “evaporation ponds” in the Tengger Desert. While the subjects of reporting were similar, it seems that what distinguished the *Death of the Desert* from the previous reports was that it came with a series of photographs taken by a professional photojournalist, Chen Jie.

Story Structure

Drawing the meaning of the “Tengger Desert” from its Mongolian origin, Chen starts the story by comparing the romantic imagination of the desert and the ugly reality he witnessed. The same metaphor was cited by other news media, like the China National Radio, when covering the Tengger Desert pollution issue. Chen wrote in the introduction:

“Tengger” is the Mongolian word for “sky”—a name chosen as the desert is seemingly as vast and endless as the heavens above. But hidden deep in this huge desert, I found sprawling pits used for treating polluted water.

Based on the story’s subtitles, the *Death of the Desert* consists of two parts, the “Nocturnal Visit” and the “Groundwater in Crisis.” In the “Nocturnal Visit,” Chen described his journey in investigating the pollution and the location, smell, and texture of the pollution. In the “Groundwater in Crisis,” Chen interviewed a villager who found it hard to extract water from his home-owned well and an expert who worried about the over-exploitation and pollution of groundwater.

At the beginning of the “Nocturnal Visit,” Chen was searching for the source of “a foul odor” that surrounded a small town named Elisi in Inner Mongolia. Several citizens said that the odor came from the factories, which “dumped untreated wastewater into the desert.” Chen then

learned from an anonymous source that the Tengger Industrial Park had a patrol team to keep outsiders away from the pollution site. The source informed Chen about how to get to the pollution site and “there might not be anyone on duty in the evening” on that day because the day Chen conducted his interviews was during the weekend.

Chen used three paragraphs to describe the pollution in detail, detailing its smell, look, and texture. The writing was immersive:

At 6 p.m., I walked into the desert in search of the source of that ever-worsening smell. After one hour, during which I had climbed over several sand dunes, the view opened out—and the smell became almost suffocating. The rectangular pits, each the size of several football fields, lie side by side in the desert and are walled with concrete and surrounded by one-man-height green fencing. Among the four pits, two pits were filled with ink-like liquid, while two others were filled with black, yellow, and dark red muds thinned with sand and lime. A bulldozer sat beside the pits with white smoke hung in the air above it.

According to the local herders, these sewage ponds are actually evaporation ponds. After the untreated wastewater entered the pits, the wastewater would evaporate and become thick and sticky sediment. The workers would shovel out the sediment with a forklift and bury it directly in the desert.

Each pit was fed by up to several white fiberglass pipes coming across the desert from the industrial park’s direction. Between the pits and the industrial park, about 1 km distance, was desert. As I walked towards the industrial park, I could see pipes exposed through the desert. In some hollows, I saw black rubber tubes that went directly into the sand,

around where the sand was black. Kicking away the crust of the black sand, I saw a dark, mud-like, and foul-smelling condensate (Chen, 2014a, paras. 4-6).

News Source

The news source pattern of the story is not very diverse, which might arouse questions regarding the story's credibility or objectivity. First, there are seven news sources cited in the story in total, six of which are anonymous civilians, including "a shop owner," "a local resident," "an insider," "a herder," "a group of construction workers," and a local resident with "Bateer" as his alias. The only named news source is a professional source, Liu Shurun, a professor of ecology at Inner Mongolia Normal University. Second, there is neither a government source nor an industry source cited in the story, which might seem that the story is lacking further verification. As a result, the story does not present any discourse between the public, the government, and the industry.

However, the *Death of the Desert* serves more as an exposure of illegal acts rather than a classic balanced news story. First, it is worth noticing that the story of the *Death of the Desert* was told via the writer's personal view. Most of the interviewees work as "guidance" in the investigative story. Moreover, the most striking part of the story—a suffocating odor, pipes crossing the desert, and vast pits of discharged water—was documented by Chen through text and images. Second, while using anonymous sources may harm news credibility (Sternadori & Thorson, 2009), it can protect news sources, especially in investigative stories. Therefore, anonymous news sources and the absence of government or industry news sources could not much undermine the quality of the story.



8月31日,记者在阿拉善左旗阿拉善旗的腾格里沙漠进行了大约一小时,看到了在沙漠深处的污水池,深到得几乎令人窒息的热气扑面而来。



数个足球大小的长方形的排污池并排置于沙漠之中,周边用木架砌成,围有一人高绿色网状铁柱。其中两个排污池注满胆汁一样的液体,另两个排污池盛着黄色、暗红色的泥浆,里面堆积着细沙和碎石。



腾格里沙漠深处,一处产碱盐的沙漠里的排污,因化工污染,碱盐也遭到污染,被废弃。

腾格里 杨杰 高静 余华 李欣 范明春

沙漠之殇

随着多利排盐池与宁夏中卫中越核技术核燃料...
“腾格里”在蒙古语的意思是“天”,用以描述沙漠...
新华社记者陈杰 陈杰 范明春 摄



在一张网,可以看到一些被排入沙漠的黑色细管,这些管造成沙漠的污染。离开表面,下面是装着着碱性的黄色液体。



未待处理的废水排入后,经过自然蒸发说下来的盐粒,这些物质被用铲出,直接堆在沙漠里。



巴特尔的家在腾格里沙漠水源地上游,几年前几米下就能触上水,现在要下几米40多米。



腾格里沙漠深处有一小绿洲,被开发成旅游点。不过,由于地下水污染加剧,这个绿洲越来越萎缩。

深挖沙漠深处排污池

8月31日,记者随自治区...
“腾格里”在蒙古语的意思是“天”,用以描述沙漠...
新华社记者陈杰 陈杰 范明春 摄

巴特尔说,他并非打算离开...
“腾格里”在蒙古语的意思是“天”,用以描述沙漠...
新华社记者陈杰 陈杰 范明春 摄

地下水危机

宁夏中卫排盐池...
“腾格里”在蒙古语的意思是“天”,用以描述沙漠...
新华社记者陈杰 陈杰 范明春 摄

“腾格里”在蒙古语的意思是“天”,用以描述沙漠...
新华社记者陈杰 陈杰 范明春 摄

Figure 2. A digital copy of the story *Death of the Desert* published on the *Beijing News* on September 6, 2014. Provided by Chen Jie.

Page Layout

There are seven pictures accompanied the *Death of the Desert* story (Figure 2). Among them, five are about the desert pollution and two are about the groundwater crisis.

While under the story's title, four pictures were arranged in a rectangular frame, the three pictures aligned vertically on the left might be the most eye-catching and intriguing elements in the layout. Altogether, they take up more than half of the whole page and visually illustrate the title of the story, *Death of the Desert*, which appears on the upper right of the page.

From top to bottom, the first picture displays an overview of the discharged water pits hidden deep in the desert, following which the second picture takes the audience steps further to

the pollution site. Moreover, the third picture depicted a polluted oasis, which was once “abundant in sodium nitrate.”

Under the story’s title, pictures in the first row depict a closer look at the pollution, one about the sewage pipe disposed and leaking in the desert and another showing the sludge-like waste that the workers were going to bury under the desert. Pictures in the second row seem more peaceful but indicate the risk of decreasing groundwater, which had made it hard for local residents to access domestic water and a once attractive lake gradually disappeared.



Figure 3. Comparison of three of the edited pictures and the original ones in *Death of the Desert*. Original photographs are provided by Chen Jie.

The aspect ratio of the three pictures was edited from 16:9 to about 13:5, which allow them to take as big a space of a page as possible. Meanwhile, the pictures were taken with a wide

lens. Compared with the original photographs (Figure 3), the edited pictures center more on the astonishing scenes of pollution and shorten the viewers' perceived distance with the pollution site.

The Impact

According to the Baidu Search Index, there were two peaks for the keyword “Tengger Desert” (Figure 4) during 2013-2014, one appeared on September 6, 2014, when the *Death of the Desert* was published, and the other appeared on October 5, 2014, when the media coverage about President Xi Jinping's direct instructions on the Tengger Desert pollution surged.

Based on media coverage, government action, and public engagement, the Tengger Desert pollution issue can be divided into three stages, the stalemate, the engagement, and the public interest lawsuit.

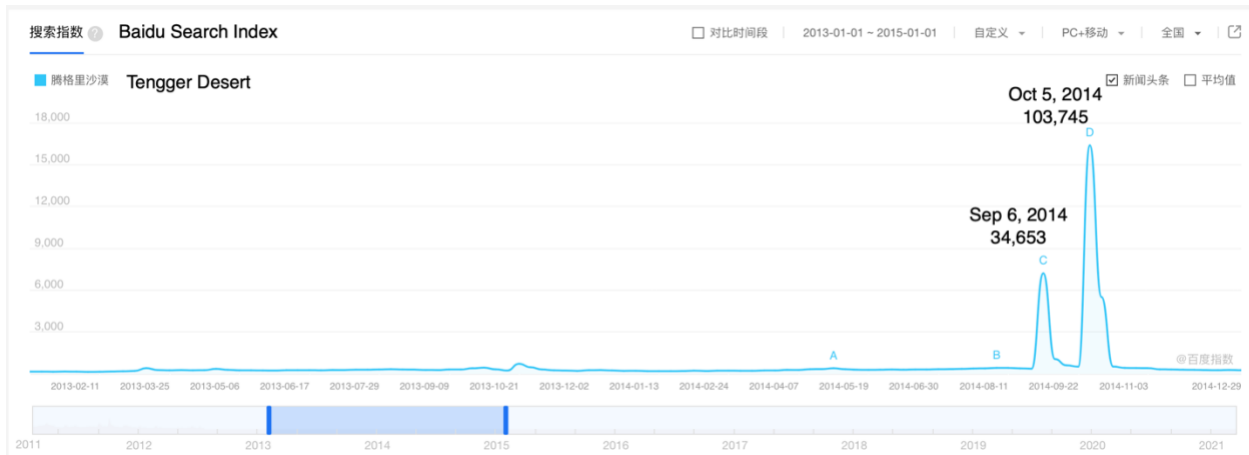


Figure 4. Baidu Search Index for the keyword “Tengger Desert” between January 1, 2013, and January 1, 2015. This figure shows two peaks that appeared in the results. One was on September 6, 2014, when the *Death of the Desert* was published; the other was on October 5, 2014, when the media coverage about President Xi Jinping's direct instructions on the Tengger Desert pollution surged. Data source: Baidu Index (百度指数)

The Stalemate

As soon as the *Beijing News* published the *Death of the Desert* on the morning of September 6, 2014, many news media in China, including state-run news media like the China

Central Television News, the *People's Daily*, and the Xinhua Net, quickly reran the story through their distribution channels and published comments to urge the local government to respond.

On the Internet, the pollution hidden deep in the Tengger Desert prompted heated discussion in China. For example, on September 6 and September 7, nearly 1300 Weibo users had left comments under the *Beijing News's* Weibo post about the story (The Beijing News, 2014). Most of them were furious about the bold pollution in a far-away desert; some demanded the government to “disclose the list of the polluters” and “punish the government officials.”

According to Chen, the local government officials from Ningxia and Inner Mongolia responded to the report differently. Chen said in a speech:

Ningxia responded on the same day the report was published by shutting down the polluting enterprises and holding the functional departments accountable. Inner Mongolia, however, exerted pressure on me and the *Beijing News* through various channels, including using the local media to obfuscate the truth (YIXI, 2018, 8:45).

Ningxia. On September 8, 2014, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported that a factory in Zhongwei, Ningxia, which had more than a decade-long history of polluting the desert, was permanently closed (Zhao, 2014). While the locals in Zhongwei complained that the local environmental protection agency rarely issued penalties for polluting actions, the agency's spokesman said that they do so because issuing penalties was not effective and “the only way to solve the pollution issue was to close and relocate the factories,” which was a power out of their reach.

Inner Mongolia. On the afternoon of September 6, an official from the Alxa League's Tengger Economy and Technology Development District, Inner Mongolia, told the *Beijing News*

that the local government has set up a response group to investigate and fix the issue. As for why the pollution still existed while many news media had reported the pollution issue in the area, the official said that “it might be due to an inadequate supervision” (Liu, 2014).

“I guarantee with my personality (人格, refers to “word of honor” in this context) that we have never buried any pollutant under the desert, it cannot be true,” said Mabayer, the chief director of the district’s Environmental Protection and Administration of Work Safety Bureau, in a radio interview with the China National Radio on September 7 (Zhang, 2014). “We have not discharged any polluted water since March 22 last year.”

The local government official’s response quickly provoked media criticism. On September 8, the *Beijing Morning Post* published an article criticizing that Mabayer’s use of his personality to guarantee zero pollution was “a laughingstock” and questioning why the media always found the pollution earlier than the government agency (Ge et al., 2014). On September 9, the *Beijing News* published an editorial demanding that the government must first treat malfeasance to solve pollution issues, stating that the environmental problems were highly related to local officials who failed to fulfill their duties (“Shamo Paiwu Shijian”, 2014).

However, the Alxa League government kept denying the environmental issues reported by the *Beijing News*. On September 12, the Alxa League government held a news conference to respond to the recent media coverage on the region’s pollution issues. In the conference, the spokesmen from the Alxa League said that the government’s investigation showed that there was no case of “discharging polluted water into the desert” (Xia, 2014). They also denied that there was a vast groundwater level change or any buried sediments in the Tengger Desert. Notably, they continued to call the “evaporation ponds” as a part of the waste recycling process and

claimed that they were constructed under the approval of the local environmental protection agency.

By far, the government response to the issue was similar to what happened after the *Time Weekly* and CCTV reported on the issue in 2011 and 2013. On September 14, an op-ed published in the *Southern Weekly* criticized that the local government was incorrigible and had no intention in solving the pollution problems, and “it was the bold indulgence for pollution that managed to attract so many polluters settled there” (Shao, 2014).

The Engagement

The turning point of the Tengger Desert pollution issue occurred at the end of September, when President Xi Jinping reportedly made a written instruction on the *Beijing News's Death of the Desert* story. According to Chen, President Xi Jinping has made three instructions on the story. Chen (personal communication, March 3, 2020) said:

Instructions on news reports are normal in our field, including written instructions on newspapers. The *Beijing News* has hundreds of copies distributed in the Zhongnanhai (note: reference to the headquarter of the Chinese central government). Normally, the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party would have two newspapers on their desks, the *Beijing News* and the *People's Daily*.

They often write their instructions on certain issues on the newspapers. This is a Chinese characteristic.

For example, basically all our reports about environmental issues will receive instructions from the State Council. Only after the State Council gives out instruction can the Ministry of Environmental Protection begin to inspect and supervise the issue.

The report (note: *Death of the Desert*) has received three instructions. The first instruction was on the report itself. Normally, the first instruction is to order a thorough investigation of the reported issue. At this time, the local government can repute your report. For example, just like what they did in the Tengger Desert pollution case, the local officials argued that the news report was not true. The second instruction was out of dissatisfaction with how the issue developed. The central government observed that the local government was avoiding the responsibility of the pollution—instead of investigating the pollution, the local government officials went on to doubt the news report, which provided thorough details of the pollution. Then the central government ordered to hold related personnel accountable strictly. The third instruction was about starting a provincial-level inspection of similar pollution issues in the Inner Mongolia region.

In brief, the first one was on a specific case, the second one was about accountability, and the third one was about inspecting similar problems on a larger scale and looking to solve them once and for all. Consequently, all the “evaporation ponds” in Inner Mongolia were demolished; the government inspection conducted in Inner Mongolia quickly spread all over the country. That is why we said that the story provoked a “storm of environmental protection.”

The exact time Xi gave these instructions is unknown. Nevertheless, evidence showed that at least one central leader, if not Xi, had given instruction in investigating the case. On September 25, the Alxa League government published an announcement on how they held 11 officials accountable (“Alashanmeng Diaocha”, 2014). The announcement said:

On September 6, 2014, after the *Beijing News* reported the environmental issues in the Tengger Industrial Park, the Alxa League government paid great attention to the issues. The government conscientiously implemented the spirit of the instructions from the central leaders and provincial leaders, sending out a workgroup to investigate and verify the case at the first moment (para. 1).

The first week in October was the National Day's holiday period in China. However, "the Inner Mongolia government was even busier than in weekdays" (Zhao, 2014). On October 4, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported that, after receiving President Xi Jinping's instruction, the Inner Mongolia government officials held several "emergency meetings" in four days to discuss how to deal with the Tengger Desert pollution issue (Li & Yang, 2014). On September 30, the Secretary of the Party Committee of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region held another emergency meeting with the Region's Party Standing Committee to communicate the President's instruction. On October 1, the Department of Environmental Protection of Inner Mongolia held a provincial-level emergency meeting to discuss the priority of related work. On October 2, the Department of Environmental Protection of Inner Mongolia summoned the directors of league-level and city-level environmental protection bureaus for face-to-face meetings. On October 3, the Department of Environmental Protection of Inner Mongolia held a meeting about how to solve the problems that occurred in the Region with league-level and city-level directors. Meanwhile, the Department claimed to have established a communication system with the Alxa League and would supervise the treatment of the "evaporation ponds" and the pollution in the industrial park. In this regard, the local government finally admitted that the "evaporation ponds" were pollution.

Soon after, the case in Tengger Desert provoked the Chinese government to conduct a national-level inspection in industrial parks and polluting firms. On October 16, the director and the deputy-director of Zhongwei Environmental Protection Bureau in Ningxia were dismissed (Liu, 2014). On the same day, the *China Environment News* reported that the State Council had distributed a document named “Announcement on the treatment of pollution in the Tengger Desert”(关于腾格里沙漠污染问题处理情况的通报) inside the government system (“Huanjingbaohubu Zhaokai”, 2014). Based on the instructions sent from the central leaders and the State Council, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of the People’s Republic of China ordered to start a national-level archiving and government inspection on all industrial parks and polluting firms. Although the document is not available to the public, a short government-issued file named “The State Council’s announcement on the treatment of pollution in the Tengger Desert” (中共中央办公厅国务院关于腾格里沙漠污染问题处理情况的通报) can confirm the official-recognized cause-effect relationship between the *Beijing News*’s report and government action:

On September 6, the *Beijing News* exposed the Tengger desert pollution and aroused great attention. The pollution in the Tengger desert has been exposed by several news media beforehand, but the situation did not get improved. On October 3, General Secretary Xi Jinping and other leaders of the central government made important instructions on the environmental pollution problem in the Tengger Industrial Park of the Alxa League in Inner Mongolia (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2018, para. 5).

While most Chinese news media were positive towards the development of the issue, some began to question the local government’s rule of law and the system of treating pollution

problems. For example, three of the most influential Chinese news media, the *Beijing News*, the *People's Daily*, and the *Guangming Daily*, published comments criticizing that the local government officials, in many cases, would only value the pollution issues after the central government leaders sent them instructions to do so; these news media demanded that such phenomenon of localism must be checked and stopped (Cai et al., 2014; Mo, 2014; Zhao, 2014).

Meanwhile, some news media delved deeper into the pollution issues. On November 17, 2014, the *Caixin Weekly*, a news magazine famous for practicing investigative reporting and journalism professionalism, published a series of investigative stories about the “evaporation ponds” mentioned in the *Death of the Desert*. The stories showed that there were hundreds of similar pollution ponds disguised as “recycling facilities” in Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Shanxi, indicating that they had become a new form of pollution boldly widespread in Western China (Kong, 2014).

Regarding the Tengger Desert pollution, on December 22, 2014, the *Beijing News* reported that the wastewater and sludge in the “evaporation ponds” were cleaned out, so were the pipes across the desert (Chen, 2014b). The local government had shut down the Tengger Industrial Park and ordered the 12 factories inside to relocate to a new industrial park with updated pollution treatment facilities. Additionally, 24 officials in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region were held accountable due to the pollution. “The smell was gone,” Chen wrote in the report.

Regarding the systematic problems in managing and supervising pollution criticized by news media, the Chinese government did conduct several systematic reforms in environmental management after the Tengger desert pollution case. For example, in December 2015, the Chinese government established a new institution, named the Central Inspection Group for

Ecological and Environmental Protection (中央环保督察组 Zhongyang Huanbao Ducha Zu), to send investigation groups around the nation to regularly inspect each province's pollution issues. According to Wu Xiaoqing, the deputy director of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the new institution was the government's response to the nation's "deteriorating environment without any fundamental improvement" (Li, 2015). Because of the institution's high authority and its role as the central government's representative at the local level, it is often called the "imperial envoy in environmental protection" (环保钦差 huan bao qin chai) by official media (Zhi, 2016). According to the *China News Weekly*, a remarkable highlight of the reform is that it marked a transition from "supervising the enterprises only" to "supervising both the enterprises and the government officials when treating pollution issues" when dealing with pollution issues, which can deter and prevent localism that protects polluters (Xu, 2017).

Nevertheless, this is far from the end of the story.

The Public Interest Lawsuit

On January 1, 2015, the revised Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China (EPL) came into effect. The new EPL's article 58 regulates that eligible social organizations in China may file environmental public-interest litigation to the people's court for activities that "cause environmental pollution, ecological damage and public interest harm" (Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, 2014). To be eligible, the social organizations must meet the following criteria: (1) Have their registration at the civil affair departments of people's governments at or above municipal level with sub-districts in accordance with the law; (2) Specialize in environmental protection public interest activities for five consecutive years or more and have no law violation records.

On August 13, 2015, the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (GDF), an environmental non-profit organization in China, brought environmental public-interest litigation cases to the Ningxia First Intermediate People's Court against eight polluting enterprises involved in the Tengger Desert pollution. To provide evidence for the lawsuit, the GDF went to the Tengger Desert three times to conduct a comprehensive sampling of polluted sand, water and vegetation (Jin, 2015). Chen participated and reported the GDF's sampling in October. In this assignment, Chen shot an award-winning photograph, *Pollution Under the Desert*. Afterward, Chen provided his photographs on the Tengger Desert pollution to the GDF; the photographs were used as evidence in the courthouse (personal communication, March 3, 2020).

However, as the EPL did not specify the definition for social organizations that “specialize in environmental protection public interest activities,” the people's courts in China had no agreement on interpreting such issue (Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation v. Ningxia Ruitai Technology Co., Ltd, 2018). On August 19, 2015, the Ningxia First Intermediate People's Court rejected the case as it argued that the GDF “did not have the standing to sue” under the EPL because the GDF's articles of incorporation did not clearly delineate its interest in “environmental public interest activities.” The GDF then appealed it to the Higher People's Court of Ningxia, which first accepted the case but later dismissed it for the same reason.

Unconvinced by the results, in late 2015, the GDF appealed the case to the Supreme People's Court (SPC), the superior appellate forum in China, which reversed the decision of the lower-level courts on January 29, 2016. The SPC pointed out that the people's courts in Ningxia interpreted the EPL narrowly. The SPC referred that a judicial interpretation it published on

January 6, 2015, named *the Interpretation of the Supreme People's Court on Several Issues Concerning the Application of Laws in Adjudicating Environmental Civil Public Interest Litigation Cases* (最高人民法院关于审理环境民事公益诉讼案件适用法律若干问题的解释), had specified how to judge whether a social organization is eligible for environmental public interest litigation and ruled that the GDF was eligible to file one. The SPC later re-published the case as the Guiding Case No. 75, which means it should be used to guide the adjudication of subsequent similar cases and ensure the uniform application of law in nationwide courthouses.

On August 31, 2017, the eight enterprises were ruled to pay an RMB 569,169,634 (about USD 87 million) bill for restoring and preventing soil pollution and an RMB 6,000,000 (about USD 0.92 million) bill for funding environmental public interest litigations. The bills were the largest in an environmental public interest case in China since the implementation of EPL and were paid up on August 2, 2018 (Cui, 2018).

A *Beijing News* editorial commented that the case result as “a bitter victory” and a warning for those local governments that blindly chase economic development at the cost of pollution (“Tengge An”, 2017). “We need more cases like this to deter the polluters and give confidence to environmental NGOs,” the *Beijing News* editorial wrote.

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STORY 2: A HOMELAND THAT CANNOT RECOVER

Introduction

On December 5, 2014, the *Beijing News* printed *A Homeland that Cannot Recover* in its Witness Column, page A12-13. The story is written and photographed by Chen Jie. Including the text and seven photo captions, the story's word length is 2,664 characters in Chinese and 2,116 words in English, after translation.

The story exposed that, in central China's Hunan province, an aluminum industrial giant, SNTA group's Chuangyuan Aluminum Co. Ltd., had heavily damaged the local environment and posed significant health risks to its employees and the local residents. Moreover, the runoff from the company's illegally disposed slag and landfill allegedly caused cancer in 10 local villagers.

The incident centered on the misconducts of Chuangyuan Aluminum in Taoyuan. The Chuangyuan Aluminum Co. Ltd. was owned by the SNTA group. The Chuangyuan's factories were located in an industrial park named SNTA Industrial Park. For convenience, the Chuangyuan Aluminum Co. Ltd. was written as "SNTA" in the following sections.

Background

Taoyuan is a county under Changde city, Hunan province, in south-central China. According to the *Beijing News*, the county was surrounded by waters and hills and used to be a scenic place. In 2001, the SNTA Changde Industrial Park, also called Chuangyuan Aluminum, started its construction. In 2003, SNTA began its production in Taoyuan without constructing the required treatment facilities or relocating nearby residents as the project's environmental impact assessment report instructed. This brought irreversible damage to its surroundings.

Beijing News was the first Chinese news media to report on the issue.

It is worth mentioning that the literal meaning of Tao Yuan (桃源) is “Peach” “Spring.” Therefore, it is natural for the Chinese public to correlate the Taoyuan county with the image of a utopia pictured in a famous essay, the Peach Blossom Spring (桃花源记 Tao Hua Yuan Ji). The Peach Blossom Spring was a fable written by Tao Qian (376-427), a poet, an official who gave up his job, and a famous recluse. The fable told a story about a fisherman who accidentally walked into an isolated valley, where people lived in harmony and self-sufficiency (Nelson, 1986). The isolated community was established by a group of refugees who managed to flee from the warfare and instability in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) and had been living in the valley ever since. As Tao Qian lived in a time when China was at the edge of breaking down and divided into northern and southern dynasties, the story is often understood as an expression of the author’s hope for a peaceful life, social stability, and national unity. In modern times, people often use “Peach Blossom Spring” or “the peach spring beyond this world” (世外桃源 shi wai tao yuan), a four-character idiom derived from the story, to refer to an unexpected natural wilderness or a paradise.

The story’s main character was a fisherman in the Wu-ling area, where Taoyuan county happens to be located nearby. According to Long (2013), Taoyuan county was named after the founding of a beautiful peach spring near the county as early as in the reign of Qian De of the Northern Song Dynasty (963-968), which was more than a thousand years ago. Although there was no evidence showing that Taoyuan county is the Peach Spring Tao portrayed in the story, the geographical characteristics and history of Taoyuan matches Tao’s description.

Therefore, the idea, as shown in the news story, that not even if an outside world’s paradise can escape from the devastating pollution brought by modern industrialization could be very concerning and provoking for the Chinese people.

Story Structure

The story consists of three parts, “Dilemma inside the Reserve Area,” “A Village Entangled by Waste Slag,” and “Difficulties of the Occupational Disease Patient,” each showcased different misconduct by SNTTO. The story’s text focused more on how people were influenced by pollution instead of pollution itself.

First, hundreds of residents still lived inside the industrial park’s health protection zone, which was uninhabitable. As the local government and SNTTO, who were responsible for relocating the residents, had no schedule for the relocation, many residents were forced to migrate from their homeland. Those who stayed had to bear with the polluted air, water, and land.

Second, several villages in Taoyuan were surrounded by the landfill and slag illegally disposed of by SNTTO, which contained high fluoride and increased local residents’ health risks. After raining, the runoff would carry the pollutant to the lower stream, which would eventually merge with a branch of the Yangtze River. According to a village’s cadre from the lower stream, at least ten local villagers had passed away due to cancer. Before SNTTO began its production in 2004, the villagers seldom heard of people having cancer. The villagers also complained that the local crop production had heavily decreased; some plants had even mutated.

Third, around 170 out of more than 200 employees from a local SNTTO factory’s electrolysis department had a high urine fluoride level, which was caused by the workplace and could cause diseases like hydrogen fluoride poisoning. However, when interviewed by the Beijing News, several former SNTTO employees said that their employer had never informed them of the severe health risks of the job; one interviewee was diagnosed with two occupational diseases and had trouble seeking workers’ compensation from SNTTO.

By interviewing government officials, the story displayed the government's attitude towards the issue. First, in the early 2000s, many experts objected to introducing SNT0 because Taoyuan county was a natural reserve area and the local economy highly relied on agriculture. Second, the pollution and relocation issues near the SNT0 industrial park were "historical problems." The local government allowed SNT0 to start production without necessary pollution treatment facilities. Although the local government had applied more than 60 million dollars to control pollution, it never truly solved the problems and had no schedule for relocating the local residents.

News Source

The story includes eight named sources and two anonymous sources. The eight named news sources include a government administrator of the industrial park, two directors from the local environmental protection bureau, a village cadre, a deputy to the Hunan Provincial People's Congress, a former SNT0 employee, and two local villagers. The two anonymous sources are "residents near the industrial park" and "former employees from an SNT0 factory."

Overall, the story's news pattern is the most diverse among the three stories. Notably, different from the other two stories, the government officials interviewed in the story had provided ample details of the pollution and admitted their responsibility to the issue, which indicates that the local government would react to the report actively.

Page Layout

Seven pictures accompanied the story, *A Homeland that Cannot Recover* (Figure 5). While the story's text details the pollution's impact on human life, the news images display visual evidence of the pollution.

In the first row, there are four pictures showing the polluted environment. From left to right in the second row, the first two pictures showed the illegally disposed slag; the last one captured a villager who was forced to leave their homeland.



Figure 5. Page layout of *A Homeland that Cannot Recover*. Source: Weibo @摄影师陈杰

The title of the story appears in the center of the page, beneath which are the credential of Chen and the introduction of the story. Different from the page layout of *Death of the Desert*, the text of this story takes up more than one-third of the page as it is longer in length.

While the three pictures in the second row are in a 16:9 ratio, the four pictures in the first row were edited to a 1:1 ratio to fit the page layout. The four pictures each showed the mutated fruits, the eroded plants, the solid waste in Taoyuan’s valley, and the polluted water body. As a group of images, such editing managed to provide more information for the audience within a limited given space.

On the other hand, as an individual image, it is notable that the way these pictures are displayed may be different from the photographer’s original attempt to present the scene. For

example, the first picture from left to right in the first row captured a villager's opened hands with mutated fruits on them.

While the edited picture (1:1 ratio) centered more on the mutated fruits, the original photograph (approximately 4:3 ratio) includes a full pair of hands of the villager and therefore aesthetically tells a more comprehensive story (see Figure 6). The edited photo cropped out the bandage on the villager's thumb, which might arouse questions on whether if the crop was to censor information. Nevertheless, as the *Beijing News* used the full-size photo in the story's online publication, the edit was more likely an attempt to display as many proofs of pollution in a limited space as possible.



Figure 6. Comparison of an edited picture (left) and the original one (right) in *A Homeland that Cannot Recover*. The original photograph was provided by Chen Jie.

The Impact

On December 6, 2014, the *Beijing News* published *A Homeland that Cannot Recover* and started a hashtag, #Hunan Taoyuan Aluminum Industry Heavy Pollution (#湖南桃源铝业重污染#Hunan Taoyuan Lüye Zhongwuran), on Weibo, the biggest social media platform in China. As of April 12, 2021, the hashtag had 15 million reads and 550 posts. On the same day, many

state-run news media, like the China Central Television News and the *People's Daily*, reran the story through their distribution channels. Besides, many popular web portals in China reposted the story, in which Tencent's repost attracted more than 28,000 comments (Chen, 2014). Some of the comments were made by former SNT0 employees and local residents, who identified themselves and confirmed the authenticity of the story.

On December 7, an op-ed published on the *Beijing News* stated that, despite the government officials actively admitting their mistakes, the critical problems are how a giant polluter keeps producing illegally for a decade without regulation and how it got introduced to Taoyuan in the first place, demanding whoever was responsible for introducing SNT0 be held accountable (Han, 2014).

On December 6 and 7, the CEO of SNT0 contacted Chen several times and said that the report had brought significant negative impact to SNT0 and they were willing to compensate "any cost" as long as the *Beijing News* could change the story's headline or withdraw the story (Chen, 2014). Chen refused his request and wrote their conversation in a follow-up news story. On later December 7, SNT0 posted an article named "About the *Beijing News*'s Falsifying Reporting on SNT0," denying almost all of the questions proposed by the story and casting doubt on the authenticity of the news images.

In contrast, on the afternoon of December 7, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported that the relevant departments in Hunan province had held an emergency meeting to investigate the pollution and relocation issue (Tan, 2014). According to the news communication, all levels of the environmental protection agencies in Hunan province, from county-level to provincial-level, had engaged in the investigation. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Environmental Protection appointed its South China Inspection Bureau to supervise the provincial-level investigation. In

the news communication, the local government admitted that SNT0 had made three mistakes in disposing of the slag and landfill. First, the SNT0 landfill failed to meet the environmental impact assessment report's requirements. Second, the SNT0 landfill had no treatment facilities and did not pre-treat the hazardous waste before disposal. Third, SNT0 illegally disposed of slag on its tailings dam, which posed a significant safety risk.

On December 10, when interviewed by the *Beijing News*, an official from the Ministry of Environmental Protection said that they had confirmed that "there were pollution issues in Taoyuan," which SNT0 should be responsible for (Jin, 2014). On December 11, during their investigation, Chen and his peer, Xiao Hui, found that SNT0 had secretly buried around 1,000 tons of waste with high-level fluoride in one of its landfills without any treatment, which might account for the surging number of cancer patients among local residents since 2006 (Chen & Xiao, 2014). The city-level environmental protection bureau then ordered SNT0 to clean up the waste within one week. According to an SNT0 representative, the company built the landfill in 2006, but they were not aware of who buried the waste and how.

On December 12, the deputy director of the Taoyuan environmental protection bureau said to the *Beijing News* that they had acknowledged the landfill issue as early as four years ago; however, the bureau neglected it due to "a lack of supervision and enforcement" (Xiao, 2014). According to the *China Business Journal*, the representatives of 1,210 local villagers had been filing petitions for suspending SNT0's pollution since 2003 (Zhang & Li, 2014). As a result, since 2006, SNT0 began to pay RMB 10,000,000 (approximately 1,533,000 USD) each year to the Taoyuan government as a lump sum payment to be applied in pollution compensation, migration, and conflict coordination. However, the villagers said they had not received any compensation fee.

On December 14 and 25, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported the results of the provincial-level investigation and the Hunan provincial environmental protection department's actions regarding this incident (“Hunansheng Huanbaoting Querren”, 2014; “Hunansheng Huanbaoting Zeling”, 2014). First, the Department ordered SNT0 to safely dispose of the waste immediately and rectify the landfill within three months. Second, it planned to file a case and impose an RMB 100,000 (approximately USD 16,000) fine for SNT0's misconduct (Li, 2014). Third, it ordered the Taoyuan county government to make a relocation plan for the residents living inside the health protection zone and publicize it within one month. Apart from the settlement of the incident, it is worth noticing that the *China Environmental News*, an official newspaper run by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, used “strictly impartial and incorruptible” (铁面无私) to describe the Hunan government's strict actions in dealing with the SNT0 case and similar cases (Liu et al., 2015). The *China Environmental News* reporters wrote:

On January 1, 2015, as soon as the new Environmental Protection Law was implemented, some local authorities had further stepped up their crackdowns on environmental violations. The director of the Environmental Protection Bureau of Yanling County, Hunan province, was dismissed for violating regulations, and the deputy director in charge was ordered to suspend his duties for inspection; Chuangyuan Aluminum in Taoyuan County, Hunan Province was fined 100,000 yuan for environmental pollution. Strict law enforcement and serious accountability demonstrate the government's determination to declare war on pollution, demonstrate the power of the new Environmental Protection Law, and let people see precise requirements to promote corporate compliance and environmental protection departments to perform their duties (para. 1).

Until April 13, 2021, there was no further reporting on the settlement of the issue. However, SNTTO's misconduct did not stop there. On March 8, 2018, the *China Environmental News* exposed that SNTTO had been illegally storing nearly 9,000 tons of waste with high-level fluoride and did not safely transfer and treat the waste before the deadline given by the local environmental protection bureau (Huang, 2018).

According to the public information obtained in this story's case, the local government acted against the polluter and did not protect the polluter. There was no record of officials denying the pollution. The polluter tried to use misinformation and bribing to obfuscate the situation and failed eventually. From the beginning to the end, the local government and the central government showed the same attitude against pollution and related misconducts.

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STORY 3: A MYSTERY LIST IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT REPORT

Introduction

On June 24, 2015, the *Beijing News* printed *A Mystery List in An Environmental Impact Assessment Report* on its Core Witness Column, page A16-17. A drone-shot image from the story was featured in the front page of the *Beijing News*'s print of the day. The story is the longest among the three selected stories. Including the text and five photo captions, the story's word length is 3,913 characters in Chinese and 2,900 words in English after translation.

Based in Ningde, Fujian, the story surrounded a "mystery list" in an environmental impact assessment (EIA) report of a project of Dingxin Co. Ltd., a local industrial giant. The "mystery list" was a list of the participants involved in the project's EIA public participation survey, which showed that the project had a satisfaction rate as high as 99%. However, the representatives of the local residents claimed that they hardly knew any of those who were marked as living in the same village with them on the list, which prompted them to conduct an independent investigation to confirm if these strangers live locally. The story followed the representatives' journey and detailed the evidence of Dingxin's illegal acts, including constructing without EIA approval and producing before relocating the local residents.

In the story, the representatives indicated that the local environmental protection bureau and the Fujian Provincial Research Academy of Environmental Sciences might have helped Dingxin to fake its new project's EIA report.

Background

Located along the coastal area of Southeast China's Fujian province, Ningde is a prefecture-level city and borders the province's capital, Fuzhou. The local villagers relied on fishing and aquaculture to earn their living (Chen, 2015a). However, as more and more industries

moved into Ningde in recent years, the local fisheries were so damaged that many locals had to give up aquaculture.

The Ningde government viewed the industrial economy as an essential driver for the city's development. The government's preference in industrial construction might predict its protection for the Dingxin Industries, a local industrial giant. According to the *Mindong Daily*, a newspaper run by the Ningde city's party propaganda department:

Industry is the main force of the economic development of our city. Only by stabilizing the industrial market can we support the overall development of our city by leaps and bounds (Han, 2015, para. 3).

According to the *China Business Journal*, the Dingxin Industries was one of the dozens of companies owned by the Qing Shan Group (Zhang, 2015). The Qing Shan Group focused on the nickel industry and had invested more than 10 billion yuan (approximately 1.5 billion dollars) in Ningde's coastal area. However, the companies under Qing Shan Group had a history of starting construction without EIA approval. In March and April 2015, the Ningde environmental protection bureau had posed multiple penalty decisions to the companies owned by the Qing Shan Group for constructing without EIA approval. Among these companies, Dingxin has reportedly received seven penalties during 2013 and 2015 for their misconducts, including constructing several projects without going through EIA procedure and exceeding standards for smoke and dust emissions (Chen, 2015a).

Apart from constructing without EIA approval, faking EIA report is a common issue in China as well. In 2011, the *Economic Information Daily*, a state-run news media specialized in economics, exposed that the Fujian province environmental protection department approved and issued an exact same EIA report for a company's two different projects (Xiao & Wang, 2010). In

2013, the *People's Daily* reported that the Chinese Academy of Meteorological Sciences had faked an EIA report's public participation survey (Yang & Hao, 2013). In 2013, the *People's Daily* had published four articles on the problem of faking EIA reports, some suggested that the key to solving similar problems is a clearer and more strict rule of law to list it as a crime (Sun, 2013). According to the Amendment (XI) to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (2020), which went into effect in March 2021, faking an environmental impact assessment report is now a crime in China and the violators can be sentenced for up to 10 years.

Story Structure

The story consists of four parts, "Verifying the List," "Questioning on the Hearing," "Constructing Without Approval," and "Producing Before Relocating." The story focuses more on the local villagers' investigation on Dingxin's alleged faked environmental impact assessment report and unfolds as the journalist discovered the company's other misconducts, like constructing without EIA approval and producing before relocating nearby residents.

First, the story started with telling the local villagers' journey in "verifying the list." In early June, the villagers obtained a brief copy of the EIA report of Dingxin Phase II issued by the Fujian Provincial Research Academy of Environmental Sciences. The villagers found that they hardly knew the participants listed in the report's public participation survey and started an independent investigation on the issue. The survey result showed that there were 288 valid questionnaires, and the satisfaction rate was 99%.

During the villagers' investigation, a village cadre told them that he and his peers "were told to be silent." The villagers found that at least 111 out of 177 participants on the list did not belong to the local registered households. The local environmental protection bureau refused the representatives' request to view the public participation survey documents of Dingxin's current

project as they involved “state secrets, commercial secrets, or individual privacy.” The bureau’s refusal was undermined by the fact that an EIA report involves public interest and therefore should be public information.

Second, the story moved to the setting of a hearing about the construction of Dingxin Phase III, which was a new project conducted by Dingxin in the same area. The villagers worried that similar fraud would happen to this new project. However, their concerns grew as the local government refused their request for a copy of the public participants list of Dingxin Phase III’s EIA report. The villagers said that the Phase II project was very contentious among the public who were affected and it is impossible that the Phase III project has a 98% satisfaction rate. According to a local official, the “strangers” on the public participation list might be the outsiders who worked and lived here; they were included to make the survey less “one-sided”. However, the official’s account was undermined by the EIA report, which detailed that the public survey’s principle was to select “the public who may be affected by the construction of the project” and “mainly the villagers from Wanwu Town.”

The third part of the story exposed that while waiting for the EIA, the Dingxin Phase III project was put into production six months ago. The fourth part interviewed a villager who lived only 65 feet away from a Dingxin factory and depicted the devastating life of the villagers who lived within the health protection area. In the end, the story showed the official account for the relocation issue by interviewing Zhang Minshun, the deputy party secretary of Wanwu Town:

On June 20, Zhang Minshun, the deputy party secretary of Wanwu Town in charge of the relocation issue of the health protection zone, said there were more than 1,000 villagers from 3 villages that needed to relocate in the Dingxin Phase II’s 1,000 meters health

protection zone. Among them, 64% of the residents had signed the agreement on relocation. The government was still coordinating with the rest.

As for the residents in the 1,000 meters health protection zone of the Dingxin Phase III project who need to relocate, Zhang said that there was no time to take care of them for now.

Zhang said that a complete settlement was still very challenging from the current point of view. And the Ningde city was ready to promote the relocation and settlement affairs of the health protection zone as a whole (Chen, 2015a, paras. 62-64).

News Source

The story includes 12 named sources and one anonymous source. The 12 named sources include four representatives of the local residents, a representative's agent, three village accountants, two villagers, a lawyer, and the deputy party secretary of Wanwu Town. Among them, there are seven civilians, four government officials, and one professional in law. The anonymous source was "a village cadre." Apart from these sources, three sources, Fujian Provincial Research Academy of Environmental Sciences, Ningde Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau, and Dingxin Industries, were interviewed but refused to respond to the issue.

Overall, the story's news pattern is relatively diverse among the three stories. Notably, the story unfolds as the representatives investigated and told the story from their angle, which might pose a significant imbalance to the news story as the representatives were interested parties. Such imbalance was partly offset by an interview with the deputy party secretary of Wanwu Town, who accounted for the "strangers" that appeared in the public participation survey as the government's attempt to include all residents, including the locals and the outsiders who worked for Dingxin.

In the story, none of the three involved parties had replied to the local representatives' accusation of allegedly falsifying the EIA report.

Page Layout

Six pictures accompanied the *A Mystery List in An Environmental Impact Assessment Report* story and one of them was featured on the front page (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The digital copies of the featured front page and the page layout of *A Mystery List in An Environmental Impact Assessment Report* published on the *Beijing News* on June 24, 2015. Source: Weibo @新京报, Weibo @这样下去怎么行

The title of the story appears in the up-left corner of the page, beneath which are four pictures accompanying the story. On the right side of the page, a picture captured a villager who was sampling polluted soils, which takes up around one-third of the page. The introduction and the credential to Chen are set between the four pictures on the left and the story's text. The text of this story takes up more than one-third of the page as it is longer in length.

The photo on the front page (Figure 8) was shot through a DJI drone and showed the scene of Dingxin Industries' bulldozers pushing slags into reeds. In the photo, the tracks left behind by the bulldozers, which went back and forth between the same starting point and the

reeds, create a sense of movement and make the scene aesthetically similar to a river delta. However, the fact that it depicts a scene of pollution is disturbing. On the left side of the story's page, the second photo from up to down showed the port of Dingxin Logistics; the photo was also shot through a DJI drone.



Figure 8. The front page photo in *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*. This figure shows bulldozers pushing slag into the nearby reeds. Provided by Chen Jie.

The first, third, and fourth photo, from up to down on the left side, displayed the pollution's impact on the local villagers' life. The first photo captured a frustrated and exciting female when she was telling how close her home was to one of Dingxin's factory—65 feet. The third photo showed two villagers picking up sea plants from their aquafarm. The fourth photo showed the interior of a villager's home—there was too much dust from the nearby factory that the villager needed to use newspapers to protect the furniture. These four photographs accompanied the story's fourth part, the depiction of the villagers' devastating life:

The home of Guo Songyu, 66, a villager from the Longzhu Village, is a two-story building with an area of 400 square meters. The gate of Guo's house faces the iron fence of the Dingxin Phase III project and is about 20 meters away from it.

The noise and smell around their home forced Guo's children to relocate to another village with their children. Now, Guo is the only one who stays behind with the big house.

At around 8 p.m. on June 11, the journalist saw in her home that all the furniture in the living room was covered in newspapers. Although the gate was closed, the journalist could still hear the factory's roaring machines and smell a pungent odor. Guo said that even if she shut the doors and windows, the dust can still get into her house.

More than a dozen of households' residents live in the health protection zone as Guo does. Most of them are older people.

Zhang Funai, 70, said that a group of people came to test the water quality in front of his house in March and told him that "the water is polluted and cannot be drunk." But the testers did not tell him why the water was polluted.

Several hundred meters away from Guo's house is the largest natural village in Longzhu Village, with more than 500 residents, and it is also located within the 1,000 m health protection zones around Dingxin Phase I and Phase II. The Dingxin Phase II project has been put into production as early as two years ago, but those who were supposed to relocate based on the EIA reports' requirements remained in the zone.

Several villagers, including Lan Yicheng, told the journalist that they had to live in huge noises every day. The air, water, and coastal farms have become more and more polluted.

The local economy relies on cultivating asparagus and fishing. Since some enterprises have started production, the phenomenon of direct sewage into the sea has become very serious. In the past two years, most farmers have given up breeding at a loss, and the investment in the breeding industry in Longzhu Village has shrunk by 2/3 (Chen, 2015a, paras. 54-60).

Different from those in the other two stories, the pictures shown in this story's page layout were not obviously edited in aspect ratio. The drone-shot photo's ratio was edited from 5:3 to approximately 3:2, which allows it to take bigger space when taking up the whole width of a front page. The other pictures were in approximately 5:3 ratio, which was not too far from the original 3:2 ratio and allowed them to fit in a limited given space on the left of the page.

The Impact

On June 24, the *Beijing News* printed the story and started a hashtag, #An EIA Participation List Was Allegedly Fake (环评调查名单疑造假 Huanping Diaocha Mingdan Yi Zaojia), on Weibo. Until April 12, 2021, the hashtag had 839,000 reads and 538 posts. Different from the other two stories, the story was not reposted by state-run news media or popular online news media on Weibo. Nevertheless, the Xinhua Net and the People's Daily Online, two news web portals operated by the corresponding official news media, reposted the story, which happened to the other two stories as well. The next day, a representative from the Ningde environmental protection bureau replied that it was the enterprise's responsibility to verify the authenticity of the public participants, not theirs (Chen, 2015b).

Similar to what happened after the other two stories were published, some news media began to question the government's role in the scandal. For example, on June 25, an op-ed published on the *Beijing News* proposed that the involved environmental authorities dared to act

against the law because the local government supported the involved project (Yan, 2015). Indeed, the local government's attitude towards the issue might reflect a close partnership between the local government and Dingxin. The *Fu An News*, a local party-run news media, reported that, on June 29, the party secretary and the mayor of Ningde city inspected Dingxin Industries and made several instructions (Li, 2015). Liao Xiaojun, the party secretary of Ningde city, ordered Dingxin to solve the relocation issue and stated that the government should "calmly analyze and seriously handle" the difficulties and insufficiencies that occurred during Dingxin's current construction. Liao said:

It is necessary to fully understand the important role of the Dingxin project in the transformation and escalation of Ningde's economy and impact on surrounding area. As for the insufficiencies and problems existing in the production and operation of the enterprise and in the construction of the project, it is necessary to resolutely take measures to rectify them effectively (para. 1).

On June 27, the China Central Television News Channel cited the *Beijing News* story in its News Weekly (新闻周刊 Xin Wen Zhou Kan) show (China Central Television Online, 2015). According to the China Central Television Online (n.d.), the goal of the News Weekly is to display and discuss the most important and attentional domestic news in each week. However, the record or transcript of the host's comments on the story is not available.

Different from what happened after the other two stories, the *Xinhua News Agency* did not communicate about the local government's response or solutions to the issue. It was possibly because the case was not reported to the State Council or the latter did not respond to it.

In the last half of 2015, several news media in China had published investigative stories around the environmental issues in Ningde and delved deep into the complicated relationship

between the local residents, the enterprise, the local government, and the local environmental authorities. For example, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* reported that the enterprise could complete the EIA later and begin construction as soon as they received approval from the local government under “a special track” (Liu, 2015). The enterprise then neglected the environmental protection bureau’s requirements in EIA and pollution control. Although the environmental protection bureau had posed various penalties for Dingxin’s misconduct, the company would pay up the fines and continue its construction or production. Meanwhile, the villagers continued to complain about the pollution caused by the company. However, the bureau could never truly solve the problems because the bureau did not have the right to suspend the company’s activity; such power remained to the local government, which relied on Dingxin to boost the local economy. Consequently, the bureau kept posing penalties to the company, the villagers kept complaining, the local government kept partnering with the company, and the company kept profiting, paying the fine, and then polluting. In the *Economy* magazine’s year-end summary, Qiao (2015) proposed that the case in Ningde is a typical dilemma of environmental protection in modern China.

In December 2015, two volunteers from environmental NGOs were harassed and detained for “prostitution and whoring” by the local police when they tried to investigate the case. According to the volunteers, the police officers told them to stay away from Ningde and “do not disturb the peace here” (Xiao, 2015, para. 13).

Beyond this point, no news media has been found reporting on the issue. So was the *Beijing News*, Chen (2018) wrote in Weibo:

Back then, I wrote the report with irrefutable evidence. However, it was disturbed and pressured by various unreasonable and truculent forces. The press was under great pressure and I was forbidden to set foot on Ningde to conduct a follow-up report.

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RESULTS

This section presents the research results in brief. According to the stories' order of publication time, the three stories and their cases are each referred to as Story 1 and Case 1 (*Death of the Desert*), Story 2 and Case 2 (*A Homeland That Cannot Recover*), and Story 3 and Case 3 (*A Mystery List in An Environmental Impact Assessment Report*), in this and the following sections.

Case 1: The story provoked a top-level investigation. At first, the local government denied the pollution. About three weeks after the story was published, the central government engaged and ordered the local government to investigate the pollution thoroughly and take active measures to solve the issue. Meanwhile, the central government made the case into a guiding document, which was distributed inside the government system. Moreover, an environmental NGO brought the case to court. The lawsuit case became a benchmark in the history of environmental public interest litigation in China.

Case 2: The story provoked a regional-level investigation. The local government officials admitted the pollution in Story 2's interview, which aligned with the government's following active responses in settling the pollution and relocation issue. Within days, the Ministry of Environmental Protection appointed a regional-level institute to supervise the local government's investigation.

Case 3: The story did not provoke any government investigation. Similar to Case 1, the local government adopted passive measures in response to the environmental problems reported in Story 2. In this case, the central government did not engage. Besides, Chen was not allowed to conduct follow-up reports and two members of Chinese environmental NGOs were harassed by local police and arrested for "prostitution and whoring."

RQ1: After Chen's environmental stories were published, what and how did the government take actions to solve the reported environmental issues?

Regarding RQ1, the government had taken action in response only after Chen's environmental reports were published. The results were in accordance with the policy of supervision by public opinion's characteristics as a multilevel social and ideological movement system. However, the government responses were different in each story and ended up in various ways as the results shown above. It is also worth noticing that, prior to the publication of the stories, the local environmental authorities in these cases had acknowledged the pollution but failed to stop the polluters' misconducts.

RQ2: After Chen's environmental stories were published, how did the local government and central government respond differently towards the reported environmental issues?

Regarding RQ2, the local government and central government responded congruently towards the reported issues in Case 2 and differently in Case 1. In Case 3, no public information has been found to show the central government's engagement. In the only case where the two counterparts responded differently, Story 1, the central government's engagement reversed the local government's previous denial of the pollution and forced it to take more strict measures against the polluters and hold officials accountable.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the proposed set of assumptions, this section discusses these stories' differences and the criteria that might contribute to a story's impact. In the end, it presents the implications of the research results.

Media Coverage

Based on the research results, several criteria of media coverage could have influenced the story's impact, including the main issue covered, news images, news sources, and news media's circulation and autonomy. Notably, none of the stories were assigned by the *Beijing News*. Instead, Chen received information from the public.

Main Issue Covered

The stories' main issues differ greatly from one and another. In Story 1, the main issue was the unregulated discharge of industrial wastewater to the desert under the guise of recycling. In Story 2, the main issue was that unregulated pollution allegedly led to surging cancer cases among locals. In Story 3, the main issue was faking an environmental impact assessment (EIA) report. The rarity of the first two stories' main issue and the universality of faking EIA report might account for Story 3's relatively low impact.

Notably, Story 2 and Story 3 both mentioned the polluters had constructed without EIA approval and produced before relocating nearby residents. The polluters in Story 1 had no similar issue, probably because there were no residents where they moved in, which was the edge of China's fourth-largest desert.

News Images

The images were important because they provided visual evidence for the polluters' misconduct and how did that damage their surroundings. In the selected cases, there is no

prominent difference among the production and presentation of the news images. Based on their content, the images that accompanied the story can be categorized as (1) the pollution and (2) the pollution's impact.

The pollution itself is often hard to trace. But in *Death of the Desert*, the pollution site was as big as several football fields and there were pipes that abruptly appeared in the desert, which all made the story visually presentable. Consequently, five out of 7 news images accompanied the story was about pollution scene. Two of the seven news images were about the underground water crisis. The changing level of underground water is invisible without specific equipment for observation, so Chen documented a shrunk lake in the desert and a villager who had trouble retrieving underground water from a home-owned well.

In the other two stories, however, the pollution was not as easy to visually present to the audience. In Story 2, the surging cancer cases were caused by the poisoning effect of the pollution. In Story 3, the villagers were troubled by noise, industrial pollution, and faked public participation survey that omitted their objection for constructing a new industrial project near their home. These problems were invisible and hard for a photographer to capture. On the one hand, as Eugen Smith did in *Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath* (Smith, 1972), Chen employed posing gestures in a photograph in Story 2 (Figure 6), in which some mutated fruits were presented in a villager's calloused hands. On the other hand, Chen documented the life of those who were affected by the pollution and how the ecological environment was damaged. For instance, in Story 2, Chen documented plants that were eroded by the air pollutants (Figure 5). Moreover, in Story 3, Chen documented a moment in a villager's house, showing that the villager had to cover all the furniture with newspaper to prevent them from the dust (Figure 9). Among few things that

were not covered, the giant portrait of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong took up the upper center of the image, which reflects the villagers' strong faith in the party's leadership.



Figure 9. A photograph that captures a villager's home in *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*. Provided by Chen Jie.

Apart from the content of the images, it is notable that some images in these cases were shot using drones. The drone's vertical view from the sky to earth brought significant alienation to the objects of images. When revisiting the Tengger Desert in October 2015, Chen photographed *Pollution Under the Desert* (Figure 10), which captured scientists and NGO volunteers sampling the polluted sands in the desert. From the drone's view, the people became dots on the desert's surface. Furthermore, the polluted black sands dug out by the samplers, spilled around the dots, resembling fireworks. Similarly, the front page photo in *A Mystery List in an Environmental Impact Assessment Report*, in which several bulldozers' tracks went back and forth between the same starting point, resembles a river delta. Compared with traditional

documentary photography, such photographs with alienation may raise the public's awareness better because they made the pollution aesthetically mystic and intriguing. The audience would first be attracted by the visual beauty of the photograph and then astonished by the fact that such "beauty" was actually "ugly" pollution. Chen collected similar photographs into his work *Looking Down the Polluted Earth*, which won the 7th Hou Dengke Documentary Photography Prize, one of the top Chinese documentary photography awards.



Figure 10. *Pollution under the desert*, an award-winning photograph featured in the *Looking Down the Polluted Earth*. This figure shows scientists and NGO volunteers sampling polluted sands in the Tengger Desert. Provided by Chen Jie.

Through various awards, Chen's images on environmental pollution went on to educate and raise public awareness of the pollution issues in China. For example, a photograph (Figure 11) from the *Death of the Desert* story, showing a white pipe in the desert, was not published on newspaper print but was widely circulated on the Internet. The photograph won the 7th Three Shadows Photography Award, a prestigious independent contemporary photography award in

China. The photograph is mystic and surreal simply because a “glass fiber reinforced plastic sand pipe” is neither supposed nor expected to be seen in a desert landscape. Three elements, desert, cloudless sky, and a white, rusted pipe, constitute this striking image of the Tengger Desert pollution. The simplicity of the photograph recalls Andreas Gursky’s *Rhine II* (Gursky, 1999), in which a power station was edited out by the photographer to display the “natural” landscape of the Lower Rhine, or Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Seascapes* (Sugimoto, u.d.), a series of photographs that consist of only water and air and convey the primitive and perpetual power of nature. Contrary to these two works, Chen’s photograph (Figure 11) is a direct photograph that shows a human-altered landscape and reflects the primitive and perpetual power of human nature; while this pipe in the Tengger Desert was two miles long and later removed, the pipe of human desire, or greed, is endless.



Figure 11. From the industrial park to the evaporation ponds, a white glass fiber reinforced plastic sand pipe stretches two miles through the desert and continuously poured untreated wastewater into the evaporation ponds. Provided by Chen Jie.

News Source

Regarding news source diversity, it is evident that Story 1 and Story 3 were lacking the voice of local government officials and the polluters. In Case 1 and Case 3, the local government adopted passive measures to respond to the stories. Indeed, such passive representation of the local government might be caused by imbalanced source use in news reporting. However, it is notable that, in Story 1, Chen was covering the story under great personal risk because the industrial park, which was run jointly by the government and the polluters, had a patrol team to keep outsiders away. Such a situation is also justifiable in Story 3, in which Chen did get to interview an official. But the official said that he was not familiar with the alleged faked EIA report. In Story 3, Chen wrote that the polluter, the local environmental authority, and the local government all declined his requests to interview them about the allegedly faked EIA report. Therefore, the news source diversity could not have yielded a significant influence on the story's impact.

News Media's Autonomy and Circulation

After a story about environmental issues is published, the local government and other involved parties may exert pressure on journalists and news media and ask for the story to be withdrawn. Such circumstances happened in all three selected cases. In the first two cases, Chen and the *Beijing News* managed to resist the pressure and continue reporting. However, in Case 3, they compromised with the pressure and Chen was not allowed to continue reporting on the story. On the other hand, Story 1's impact is based on the circulation of the *Beijing News*. According to Chen, the newspaper copies were distributed in the central government. Such circulation certainly increases the newspaper's exposure in the government's decision-making level and the chance of it getting reviewed by central leaders.

Public Engagement

Under this study's context, public engagement refers to the participation and active actions made by individuals and public organizations. In Case 1, public engagement is proved to be important for increasing a story's impact. However, sitting together, Case 1 and Case 3 suggested that public engagement may not perform its power unless it received an official "authorization" from the government (especially the central government). For example, the GDF's environmental public interest litigation in Tengger Desert pollution would have been rejected if the Supreme People's Court interpreted the related law articles as the local courts did. Nevertheless, with the help of the Supreme People's Court, GDF's continuous efforts between 2015 and 2017 made the case a monumental victory in the history of public interest lawsuits in China.

Government Engagement

The local government adopted passive measures to treat environmental issues in Case 1 and Case 3. Regarding the process of government response, the main difference between the two cases was that the central government engaged in Case 1 and did not engage in Case 3. In Case 3, without the central government engagement, the local government managed to keep the issues in the "stalemate" stage. For example, although other news media had attempted to investigate issues around the faked EIA report, Chen was not allowed to conduct follow-up reports and two members of Chinese environmental NGOs were harassed by the local police and arrested for "prostitution and whoring." Therefore, the central government engagement, which appeared to be the only force that could reverse the "stalemate" stage in this study, was the decisive factor in Case 1 and Case 3.

In Case 1 and Case 2, the central government ordered different levels of investigation and paid different levels of attention to the reported issues. In Case 1, President Xi Jinping gave instructions to conduct a top-level investigation, which required the State Council to establish and send a workgroup to Inner Mongolia and to make it a guiding case to be studied in the national government system. In Case 2, the impact of the case was limited in Hunan province. Such differences in the level of investigation and attention influence the higher limit of a story's impact.

Timing

The timing of publication could have determined a story's impact. As the revised Environmental Protection Law would be effective in 2015, in 2014, the Chinese government would have needed a symbolic case to promote the new policy and communicate its determination in environmental protection. The Tengger Desert pollution case was an example. Apart from President Xi's three instructions, the State Council made it a classic case by making and distributing a guiding document named "Announcement on the treatment of pollution in the Tengger Desert" inside the government system. Government officials at different levels were required to study the document. Guided by the document, the Ministry of Environmental Protection then ordered to start a national-level inspection and archiving on industrial parks' pollution.

Story 2 was published in December 2014, and only two months after President Xi gave instructions on Tengger pollution. Therefore, the reason why the local officials actively cooperated with Chen's reporting might be that they were deterred by the central government's determination in environmental protection. Similarly, Story 3 was published in June 2015, which

was long after Case 1's climax. The Tengger pollution case's influence on the local officials might not be as big as it had been in December 2014.

Summary

In conclusion, an environmental story's impact in China can be influenced by four factors, the story and its publisher, public engagement, government engagement, and timing. These factors also interact with each other.

First, a compelling story itself sets a basis for further impact. The prerequisite for a story to yield impact is that it needs to be high-quality and provide ample evidence of the environmental issue. Similarly, there is no power of photojournalism without photographs. The photographs are the fundamental vehicle of the visual evidence of pollution and people's sufferings. Meanwhile, the autonomy and circulation of the news media that publishes the story is crucial to resist pressure and reach different audiences.

Second, after the publication of a story, public engagement can exert further pressure on the government. Under the policy of supervision by public opinion, the pressure can urge the government to react to the reported issue.

Third, categorized by administrative level, the government can be divided into the central government and the local government. In the selected cases, a story's impact is largely influenced by the local government before the central government engaged, no matter how the former chose to protect or punish the polluter. Notably, the government's stated goal in environmental protection and reform in the environmental management system might increase the government's willingness to engage and weaken possible media censorship on critical environmental journalism. Based on the selected cases, the first two factors might be less likely to gain their impact without the engagement of the central government.

Fourth, different from the others factor, timing can influence the other factors in various ways. Therefore, the timing might be the biggest factor that influences the impact of a story. For example, before the publication of the *Death of the Desert*, a number of news media had covered the same case, but the situation merely changed. However, in 2014, the *Beijing News*'s story provoked a perpetual impact that involved accountability, law enforcement, and law interpretation. Indeed, the key power that prevents the case from ending like the previous others was the central government's engagement, which might not occur beforehand because the economic modernization once largely outweighed environmental protection. Nevertheless, such power also could not occur without the striking images produced by Chen, which might not occur beforehand because his job was as an editor before 2014. And there was only a limited number of investigative journalists and few news media that could provide substantial financial support for investigative journalism.

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LIMITATIONS

The present paper is the first study to research the impact of certain environmental stories under the context of environmental reporting in China. However, it only makes sense of the power of environmental photojournalism in China under the context of a specific time frame. Furthermore, there are several limitations that might undermine the study's findings.

First, this thesis is limited by the number and characteristics of the studied cases, which might not be representative enough to generalize the knowledge. Meanwhile, three cases, which were in between 2014 and 2015, are not enough to accurately reflect the current relationship between the journalists and the government in China as the relationship has always been dynamic and changes over time. In this regard, a study on more recent cases can further examine such a relationship or propose a new relationship. To elaborate, the government and the critical journalists might be more congruent and encounter less conflict in environmental reporting because: (1) number of investigative journalists reduced; (2) the government gained more control of media, which might have reduced the alternative voice; (3) since critical journalists and the government share the same attitude in solving environmental problems, critical journalists might choose to conduct in-depth and solution-oriented *constructive journalism*. For example, when reporting on the reappearance of desert pollution in 2019, Chen chose to inform the government to investigate the pollution before he published the report, which gave the government more time to deal with the problems and allow him to gain more access to how the problems were solved.

Second, the primary source of this thesis is limited due to a lack of access to Chinese government files. Related government files might reveal the details of government actions and provide a more definite account of the relationship between the news story and its impact.

Third, the impact of Story 1 relies on Chen's personal account. For example, there is no available visual copy of President Xi Jinping's written instruction on the news story. And there is no way that can be applied in this thesis to examine Chen's account because I have no access to the officials in the Chinese central government.

Fourth, this thesis lacks political or economic theories, like *influence peddling* or *regulatory capture*, to provide a more comprehensive set of assumptions. For example, regulatory capture is often used to explain the government's protection for polluters or big capital. And the *promotion tournament model* predicts that the Chinese officials are incentivized by promotion measured by GDP growth. Therefore, the officials' idea of tourneying for promotion might lead to regulatory capture, meaning the government may come to be dominated by the interests they regulate and not by the public interest. It is also essential to have a theory or case evidence to support that the central government's power is overwhelming and could override any other theories that explain government behaviors. Similar theories or hypotheses are needed to better explain the actions of local government and why the public complaints were not effective. Similarly, the present study lacks conversations between journalism in the west and journalism in China. For example, it would be better to present more literature about media-policy and have them in the discussion section.

Fifth, the hypothesis that the importance of environmental protection has surpassed, or at least equalized with, the importance of economic modernization in the Chinese government's official discourse has not been examined. It will need a discourse analysis on Chinese news media's reporting on environmental issues to examine the hypothesis; desirable official sources to examine the hypothesis include the *China Environmental News*, the *People's Daily*, the *Xinhua News Agency*, and *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*. Meanwhile, comparative

research on the local government-run news media's discourse on economic development and environmental protection can examine if the local government had prioritized environmental protection as the central government supposedly did.