

Chapter 8

“We Need One Natural River for the Next Generation”: Intersectional Feminism and the Nu Jiang Dams Campaign in China



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8.1 Introduction

Several hours into the two-day journey from Kunming to the Nu River Valley, I turned to the woman next to me, a well-known environmentalist, to discuss my research topic. “I’m writing about the civil society movement to stop the Nu Jiang dam,” I explained. She looked surprised. “But there is no civil society. There is no social movement.¹ We don’t have any...local people here” (Interview 16, March 2016).

Looking around the minivan full of journalists and prominent Nu Jiang anti-dam activists, I saw that nearly every person was from the urban centers of Beijing or Kunming, highly educated, of the Han ethnic group (the majority ethnic group in China), from elite or middle-class backgrounds, and employed as academics, journalists, and international non-government organization (NGO) workers. It was also striking that there was only one man in the van. Given that this group represents the main campaigners working to stop the dam project, this paper explores the dynamics of a campaign led not by affected people themselves, but predominantly by journalists and urban environmentalists.

¹I use the term “civil society” to mean any groups or collections of individuals “which are independent from family, government or business, promote a public interest, and do not seek economic profit” (Matelski 2013: 154). This may include NGOs, CSOs, religious and interest groups, and social movements. Based on this definition, there is in fact a Nu Jiang anti-dams civil society even if it does not include local people.

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While research has been conducted on this significant case study of anti-dam activism, particularly as it represents one of the few success stories of anti-dam campaigns in the Mekong region, most existing research has either neglected or only briefly commented on the social identities of the campaigners, such as their gender, ethnicity or class.² This is not unique to analyses of the Nu Jiang campaign or Chinese environmental civil society; as Howell (2007: 416) notes, to date, “civil society theorists have paid scant attention to the gendered nature of civil society.” Furthermore, the ‘ethnic’ nature of civil society has often gone unexamined in studies on civil society in China unless it is ethnic minority led; as Mullaney comments, in the academic world, Han identity “enjoys a powerful and hegemonic neutrality all its own” (2012: 2–3).³

Yet, looking around the van, it seemed clear to me that the ability to influence policy and lead environmental campaigns took place in the *context* of the social identity of the campaigners. To not acknowledge this would miss a key understanding of the dynamics in China of how civil society’s influence, strategies and successes vary especially according to who is campaigning, but also when, where, and on what issue. While the campaign’s end result was successful, the dynamics of the campaign also bring to light some of the gender, class, and ethnic inequalities and cleavages within Chinese society.

By and large, the local communities who would be impacted by the project and are mainly from rural and ethnic minority backgrounds, have a limited voice in the national and international debates about the project. In terms of gender, while women are leaders of the campaign, it is the predominantly male scientists and policy makers who are conferred with ‘expert’ status and with the most authority to influence decision makers. Therefore, the Nu Jiang case can also reveal the social and structural limitations as well as opportunities that actors in social movements need to navigate.

To present my research findings, this chapter will start with the project’s methodology, followed by background and context on civil society and environmentalism in China as linked to the Nu Jiang dams project and campaign. I will then present an analysis of the research by examining how an intersectional feminist framework can help reveal a deeper understanding of China’s social and political context, civil society, and the Nu Jiang campaign case. Finally, I discuss how gender, ethnicity, and class influenced the political opportunities available during the Nu Jiang campaign and its ultimate outcome both in making it ‘successful’ and in considering the potential to reinforce status-quo power relationships.

²For other Nu Jiang research, see Xie/Van der Heijin (2010) on political opportunities, see Yang/Calhoun (2007) for research on the role of media, and see Matsuzawa (2011) on the use of transnational ties and activism.

³For a more comprehensive examination of Han-ness, Tibetan-ness and ethnic identity in China, see Harrell (2012), Mullaney (2013), Zenz (2013).

8.2 Methodology

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

I conducted a total of 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews and an additional 10 informal interviews. For each interview, I either recorded or took notes depending on the context, and then typed up the interviews afterwards using the qualitative software QDA Miner Lite. Interviews were conducted mainly with ENGO workers in Yunnan and Beijing, with the majority having a specific Nu Jiang focus, as well as several journalists, academics, and local residents of the Nu Jiang. Out of 21 in depth interviews, 17 were women and 4 were men; 13 were Han and 8 were Tibetan, Naxi, Bai, Lisu and Hani. To conduct the research, I visited Yunnan Province twice and Beijing once between November 2015 and April 2016.

This research was done with a research approach drawing on an understanding of intersection feminism. One issue I faced as a researcher was that of representation. Intersectional feminism “ponder(s) the question of who has the right to write culture for whom” (Behar 1995: 7). As a person of Asian descent from the West who works with NGOs in Asia, I am not an ‘insider’ but nor am I an absolute ‘outsider’; this position made accessing interviews, some of which were conducted with friends and colleagues much easier, but there are still many limitations to my knowledge of social and ethnic dynamics in China. Throughout the research I have attempted to draw upon the lessons of my own experiences with gender, ethnicity and class as a Westerner and ethnic minority in my own context without assuming Western standards or values to be analogous with those in China. In this process, I have consulted peers and colleagues identifying from a diverse set of ethnicities from China to identify and reflect on my assumptions as a Western researcher; however, any errors or deficiencies of this chapter remain my own.

Finally, security and ethics were a significant concern, given the sensitivity of hydropower issues in China. As most interviewees preferred not to be publicly identified due to concerns about political repercussions, interviews are denoted by numbers and as a security precaution, exact dates or the location of interviews are not published. The only named interviewees are Dr. Yu and Wang Yongchen, two high profile figures who permitted the use of their real names.

8.3 Background: Civil Society and Environmentalism in Authoritarian China

Civil society groups and ENGOs in particular have proliferated to become a significant force in China since the early 1990s. As Sun/Zhao (2008: 144) note, ENGOs in China have “considerable mobilization capacity, international networks, and a history of several successful environmental campaigns”. Despite restrictions which vary from bureaucratic obstacles in receiving registration and funding to police monitoring, intimidation and repression employed by the state, ENGOs are able to find strategic ways to operate and navigate such conditions, through strategies including “negotiation, evasion or feigned compliance” (Saich 2000: 125–6).

Moreover, civil society does not necessarily have to be oppositional to the state, and may even contribute to the stability of a regime when its activities and aims align with the regime’s interests. Teets (2014: xi) demonstrates this point with the concept of “consultative authoritarianism”, where civil society groups may be allowed and even encouraged by authoritarian regimes when their collaboration is found to be useful to the government and they are deemed sufficiently non-threatening—a condition which is frequently correlated in China with ethnic identity and the topic at issue. As one female Beijing based academic in her 40s explained,

The government’s attitude to NGOs is that *you can be my helper but you are not my master*. NGOs can have more political space compared to the past but only if you follow what is the government’s interest...you can work as long as you help me with my agenda. You can’t come in with your own agenda that could be more powerful than me, like women’s rights groups...Environmental groups go in the same line with government policy, so they can be allowed and given more space. (Interview 18, April 2016, *emphasis added*)

As this quotation highlights, environmental groups have been able to grow as environmental protection becomes a top concern for China’s authorities. This concern is due to multiple reasons, including apprehension among political leaders over the impact of environmental damage on both GDP and social unrest (Economy 2004). As a result, ENGOs in China have experienced political opportunities not available to groups working on other issues such as women’s rights. In some cases, they have successfully been able to push their work beyond what Xue Ye from Friends of Nature labelled “bird watching, tree planting and garbage collection” (as cited in Büsgen 2006: 26) to work more on political issues such as hydropower or pollution, on the occasions that such work also allies with government interests.

While previous research on environmental civil society in China has rarely engaged with the issues of gender, class, and ethnicity, this research will demonstrate its importance. Without discussing identity in the context of civil society, we have less context to understand the tactics and strategies as well as successes or failures of groups in China and elsewhere.

First, groups in China which use activist tactics are often lauded and paid attention by Western researchers, donors, and stakeholders, while ‘softer’ tactics such as conservation and cultural preservation spark less enthusiasm. Yet, there is a lack of understanding that groups make strategic choices which are highly related to ethnicity and location, with Beijing, urban, and Han groups having more political opportunity to engage in direct advocacy on environmental issues. Meanwhile, ethnic minority groups are more likely to employ strategies such as cultural preservation to be able to conduct their work with less repression, as I discuss further below. Second, the success or failure of a group’s activities should also be understood in their social context in order to avoid drawing wider conclusions based on incomplete information. It would be dangerous for example, to assume that the Nu Jiang campaign’s strategies and successes could be replicated by other groups in China, without considering the diverse social and power structures that they must navigate.

8.4 Background: Nu Jiang Project and Campaign

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

Hearing of the Yunnan provincial government’s plan to build a cascade of 13 dams and two reservoirs on the mainstream of the Nu River in cooperation with the Huadian Power International company, environmentalists mobilized to take action to try to keep this ‘last’ free-flowing river undammed (Lin 2007: 169). The key leaders of the campaign were Wang Yongchen of Green Earth Volunteers and Dr. Yu Xiaogang of Green Watershed in partnership with other ENGOS, mainly International Rivers, Friends of Nature, Global Village Beijing and the now-defunct China Rivers Network, as well as independent NGO workers, volunteers, journalists, academics and scientists who played supporting roles. The campaign also worked closely together with individuals from the State Environmental Protection Authority (SEPA)⁴ who provided key information and support to environmentalists (Sun/Zhao 2008: 151–156).

The ensuing campaign from 2003 to 4 resulted in the suspension of the dam in February 2004 by Premier Wen Jiabao and was “one of the most high advocacy campaigns....and controversial cases of NGO advocacy as [of] yet” (Büsgen 2006: 6).

⁴Now the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP); will be referred to throughout this paper as SEPA in reference to its name at the time of the events.

While the project was suspended in 2004, the campaign has continued until the present day, due to concerns that the project could be revived again. Since 2004, environmentalists have used a variety of strategies to keep pressure on the local authorities and central government, including an annual media trip for journalists and NGOs to the Nu Jiang, collecting scientific data and evidence about geological instability in the area, meeting with policy makers, making connections with downstream NGOs and international organizations, and public awareness activities such as photo exhibitions in Kunming and Beijing (Interview 13, March 2016; Interviews with Wang Yongchen, Dr. Yu Xiaogang, March 2016).

Since the Chinese government has not formally cancelled the projects, it is difficult to claim the campaign as an outright success if success is measured only by formal cancellation. However, campaigners believe the Nu Jiang dams are unlikely to be built because the Nu Jiang area has been established as a national park area. Two parks have already been approved as of May 2016, namely the Grand Canyon National Park and Dulong River National Park (Zhaohui 2016). Furthermore, the latest 5-year plan from the National Energy Administration released in late 2016 does not include mention of the dams on the Nu (Phillips 2016); the lead environmentalists believe this to mean that the dams are unlikely to be built in the future. While environmentalists also have concerns with the environmental impact of the large scale tourism development the national parks are likely to bring, they still unanimously expressed that this would be a superior result than the dam project in their opinion (Interview 13, March 2016; Interviews with Wang Yongchen and Dr. Yu Xiaogang, March 2016).

In the following sections, I bring an intersectional feminist analysis to these interviews and experiences of the Nu Jiang Campaign.

8.5 Intersectional Feminist Analysis of the Nu Jiang Campaign

Using an intersectional feminist lens, this section will show that the available political opportunities and outcome of the campaign were influenced by gender, ethnicity and class factors, starting by contextualizing this research within the field of existing intersectional feminist writings.

8.5.1 Intersectional Feminist Literature and Identity in China

Scholarship on intersectional feminism provides an important contextual setting for understanding the dynamics of civil society and women's experiences in the Global

South⁵ such as the Nu Jiang campaign, for a number of reasons. Firstly, intersectional feminist and Third World feminist writers have successfully widened the scope of feminist writings to include the experiences and voices of women of color and women from the Global South, in particular emphasizing the importance of situating women’s experiences within broader contexts such as colonialism and neoliberalism as well as patriarchy (Mohanty 1991; see also Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000).

Secondly, as a field, intersectional feminism has pushed feminist theorists to uproot what Anzaldúa terms “dualistic thinking” and go beyond essentialist categories of men versus women (1987: 80) towards a more nuanced understanding of identity and power. By bringing in analyses of factors that influence women’s experiences beyond gender such as class, ethnicity, race, physical ability and sexual orientation, intersectional feminist writers explore what Mohanty (1991) terms the “relations of power” between multiple, cross-cutting, and sometimes fluid identities.

While including voices of women from the Global South is an important step towards a more inclusive feminism, it is still incomplete unless such writings also deal with the “relations of power” within Global South contexts such as China. Writings published under the framework of intersectional feminism frequently refer to “Chinese women” as one group without reference to ethnic or class divergences (see Ong 1995; Han 2000; Barlow 2004). Zheng notes this dynamic and the absence of class (although not ethnic) analysis among Chinese feminists, noting that “in sharp contrast to transnational feminist emphases on multiple systems of oppression and intersectionality of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, the absence of “class” in Chinese feminist articulation is glaring” (2010: 113).

In the context of China, ‘woman’ is an identity shared by more than half a billion people, and can mean a great range of human experiences, so to speak only in terms of gender is only one node among many intersections. ‘Woman’ could mean a Han migrant worker woman in Guangzhou; a Tibetan woman with a Ph.D. living in the city in Kunming, Yunnan; a Naxi woman farmer living in a remote village; it could also mean a highly educated Han woman from a politically connected family in Beijing. All of these women face different privileges and disadvantages related to their multiple identities; thus, an intersectional feminist perspective reveals why it is important to ask precisely which women we are talking about when we talk about women (Brooks/Hesse Biber 2007). For these reasons, this chapter aims to contribute towards a deeper analysis and interrogation of the “Global South” woman within feminist literature, not only in opposition to the West, but also within the Global South context, given that ethnic and class stratification and inequality also exists *within* China and other Global South contexts.

⁵While “Third World” is commonly used in intersectional feminist literature, in this chapter I prefer to use “Global South” as a term with less potentially pejorative connotations, particularly given that China would have been considered a “Second World” country according to the original meaning of the term.

8.5.2 *Nu Jiang Campaign Profile and Identities*

The Nu Jiang campaign profile shows a small group of highly educated, urban professional environmentalists, with limited grassroots participation. The campaign almost perfectly meets Jenkin's definition of a professional Social Movement Organization (SMO) with "outside leadership, full time paid staff, small or nonexistent membership, resources from conscience constituencies, and actions that 'speak for' rather than involve an aggrieved group" (1983: 533).

Han women from Beijing and Kunming make up the majority of the Nu Jiang environmentalists. Out of the three organizations still highly active on the Nu Jiang dam, all the staff and leaders are women except for Dr. Yu of Green Watershed, and all are Han or Western staff based in cities (Interviews 13, March 2016; Interview 4, November 2015; Interview with Wang Yonchgen, March 2016). On the other hand, the dam-affected area, the Nu Jiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture is one of the more remote and least developed prefectures in China; over half of its residents live under the poverty line, and most are ethnic minorities (Hu/Li 2014). There are nine ethnic groups living in the Nu Jiang area, with the majority of the population being ethnic Nu, Lisu, Bai, or Tibetan (Grumbine 2010).

These dynamics are by no means limited to the Nu Jiang campaign, but I found to be common among Chinese ENGOs that I interviewed. Out of the eleven ENGOs I interviewed in Beijing and Yunnan province, eight had female leaders and almost half of the organizations had no male staff. Meanwhile, all eleven ENGOs were led by an individual of ethnic Han identity, and seven had no ethnic minority staff.

The reasons for these dynamics are multifaceted. I will go through three key issues in turn, gender, ethnicity, and then class. Firstly, in terms of gender, women are highly represented in civil society in China, for reasons both to do with women's leadership as well as gender inequality. While some interviewees felt positive about women's representation in civil society, the majority of women NGO workers interviewed saw this dynamic as a "gender burden" that women took on by working for low wages, facing risk of arrest and intimidation, and little social recognition in return. As one woman in her 30s working in an ENGO in Yunnan stated,

In China we say that working in a NGO or CSO job is "outside the system". Working for government or official job "inside the system" is safer, more secure...Although we see many women working in civil society, it is also because civil society jobs are considered as women's work: low pay, risky, dangerous and undesirable. (Anonymous interview) (Interview 10, December 2015)

Despite acknowledging this inequality, many women interviewees did not view themselves as victims, pointing out that they also experienced freedom from the social expectations to be high wage earners that men face, and could instead do the work that they felt passionate about. This included, as another female ENGO worker in her 20s, explained,

I think it's also positive: women want to do this work (in ENGOs), women also have more economic freedom to do this work. Men have no choice, they must get a high paying job, maybe they can only work in an NGO after they retire. (Interview 2, November 2015)

The female environmentalists working on the Nu Jiang are therefore both advantaged and disadvantaged by their gender; on the one hand, they have the freedom to work on issues they care about with less social pressure, but they also take on more risky and dangerous work. As civil society members, their work is considered “low status,” so they work with ‘experts’ such as scientists, who are usually male, to bolster their credibility with the government.

Second, in terms of ethnicity, despite the Nu Jiang area being predominantly inhabited by ethnic minorities, all of the key environmentalists are of Han ethnicity and none are from the area itself. One reason for this is that while many people of ethnic minority backgrounds do work in civil society groups, ethnic minority staff or groups based in ethnic minority areas often avoid working on issues such as hydropower as doing so would result in being targeted for heightened surveillance (Interview 3, November 2015; Interview 8, December 2015). In order to avoid increased targeting by local authorities, their work tends to focus on less sensitive issues such as cultural preservation, conservation or environmental education (Interview 8, December 2015; Interview 9, December 2015).

For example, one male ethnic minority NGO worker in Yunnan responded, “I’m not allowed to talk about hydropower” when asked. Instead, he explained that their organization focuses on environmental education related to river issues, stating “we use a positive way. We make everyone like it (nature), if they like it, they will protect it. Then we are also safe” (Interview 9, December 2015). For the most part, only Han urban environmentalists had the political opportunity or space to openly address environmental justice issues such as dams, a point that will be further elaborated in this chapter.

As well as political repression, one female NGO worker who had previously been involved in the campaign shared her feelings about lack of trust between local communities and the NGOs preventing more ethnic minority and local participation by stating,

We can't say that local people really trust us. Maybe it's not that they don't trust, but I think if you speak their language, it certainly would make a huge difference. Not only language, but also, I felt whenever I was in Nu Jiang, I never met anyone that I felt we can openly discuss anything, I'm just asking questions, questions, questions. They don't come to you, they don't really open up, and also I think the local people have an image of the Han people. (Interview 17, March 2016)

While surveillance may be the main reason for lack of local participation, lack of trust between local ethnic minority communities and Han-led ENGOs is also a factor to be considered, as the above quote illustrates. Of course, this challenge is likely exacerbated by political repression; as the ENGO workers are often followed by local police when visiting the area, this is also a factor which significantly hinders building relationships with local communities.

Thirdly, in terms of class, it is well known that most ENGOs in China come from the middle class. As Yang (2010: 123) notes, “Chinese environmentalists are well-educated urban professionals. On the spectrum of the burgeoning middle class, they represent the more intellectually oriented elements and are distinguished from business and political elites...environmentalists resemble intellectuals more than other social strata in Chinese society.”

The intellectual status of Chinese environmentalists is a both an advantage and disadvantage in the Nu Jiang context. On the one hand, their status gives them what Yang terms “transnational competence” including an ability to understand international NGO culture such as proposal writing, as well as social capital, in particular media connections and access to some members of the political establishment. However, he also raises concerns that this limits their appeal beyond the middle class, arguing that “it may hinder the building of broad-based social alliances” (Yang 2010: 122–124), a dynamic which is reflected in the largely middle-class nature of the Nu Jiang campaign.

The next section of this chapter will discuss how these gender, ethnic and class dynamics influenced the strategy and outcome of the Nu Jiang campaign reading this work through the framework of political opportunities.

8.6 Political Opportunities and the Nu Jiang Campaign

This section explores how the Nu Jiang environmentalists, as well-connected and highly educated Han professionals, were able to operationalize the political opportunities and advantages necessary to influence policy change. I consider how these identities (the gender, ethnicity, and class of these ‘professionals’) matter to political opportunity, and how, together, they may provide particular kinds of political influence and opportunities, and restrain others. In fact, the Nu Jiang campaign is a classic example of how complex and dynamic political opportunity can be, and how an intersectional analysis can deepen our understanding of political opportunity. As O’Brien and Stern note when describing political opportunity and environmentalism in China, “there is not one unitary, national, opportunity structure, but multiple, crosscutting openings and obstacles to mobilization”, further noting that “the most obvious way to unpack opportunity is by social group... opportunity also varies by region and issue” (2008: 14).

McAdam’s (1996) framework of political opportunities identifies four aspects: increasing access to the political system; a divided elite; elite allies; and limited state repression as the most significant factors necessary for groups to be able to influence social change. In the case of the Nu Jiang campaign, I find that the most significant opportunities in this case were a divided elite, elite allies, and relatively low state repression on this particular issue and towards some individuals in the campaign. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, I will unpack how these opportunities were influenced by class, ethnicity and gender.

8.6.1 *Elite Allies and a Divided Elite*

Elite allies in the State Environmental Protection Agency played an influential role in furthering and legitimizing the Nu Jiang anti-dams movement. A personal friend of Wang Yongchen, Pan Yue joined SEPA in 2003 as a vice minister, and publicly described ENGOS as a ‘governmentally’ of SEPA. At that time, SEPA had limited resources – only 300 staff members – and struggled to wield significant authority (Economy 2004: 21). Wang Yongchen recounted this alliance,

In 2003, I have a friend working in the environmental department (SEPA), he was thinking that in the whole of China, we have already set up large scale dams, except two rivers, one of which is the Nu River. So this high official in SEPA, he said *we need (to keep) one natural river for the next generation*. (Interview with Wang Yongchen, March 2016, *emphasis added*)

As recounted by Wang, individuals within SEPA who opposed the Nu Jiang dams saw ENGOS as allies who could help advance their environmental agenda, through influencing the general public, and using their ability to take more critical stances than a government agency could.

Alongside cultivating elite allies, the Nu Jiang campaigners also used the divide between the local authorities, SEPA and the Communist Party of China (CPC) and State leadership in order to push for their agenda. While the project was backed by the Nu Jiang authorities and the Yunnan provincial government as a source of potential revenue, key figures in SEPA opposed the project and the campaigners also believed the central government’s top leadership could be persuaded to intervene against the project, given the central government’s increasing interest and commitment to environmental issues. Considering these divided interests, Nu Jiang environmentalists focused much of their energies on advocating towards the CPC and central government leadership as potential allies who had the authority to stop the project from moving forward (Interview with Dr. Yu, November 2015).

These strategies of building alliances with elites and exploiting elite divisions were implicitly, rather than explicitly, based upon class, ethnic and gender identities. While Sun and Dingxin argue that “the top leadership tends to offer support to ENGOS when there is no or little opposition to an environmental campaign” (2008: 159), this support is very much dependent upon the identity of the group in question. As well-known and respected Han journalists and environmentalists, Wang Yongchen, Dr. Yu and other campaigners were able to cultivate and use their personal relationships or *guangxi* and their status to gain more support and legitimacy for the Nu Jiang dams cause.

Numerous experiences recounted demonstrate the difference in political opportunities available in China to urban Han groups versus ethnic minority and rural environmentalists. In an interview with an ethnic minority woman in her 30s working with a rural environmental organization in Yunnan province, she discussed the restrictions by the government that her organization faced and their inability to work on sensitive issues such as hydropower.

Even as a company, the police are still watching us. They come to our activities, they see us as sensitive...After I book a flight ticket, every time, they call me, want to know where I'm going: I don't know exactly how they know when I book a ticket, of course they are monitoring us. But I think it's okay because everything we do is legal and good for people, just protecting culture, language...Working on dams, it's too difficult...And the country is too strong. Asking for compensation is possible, but stopping the dam is impossible. Policemen will put you in jail; they catch one or two people if they protest and make everyone afraid. (Interview 8, December 2015)

While rural and ethnic minority organizations face significant restrictions even for non-political activities, Han and urban organizations, particularly Beijing-based organizations, have been able to advocate on sensitive issues such as the Nu Jiang dams and gain the support of elite allies in SEPA and the central government, though they have also faced challenges and restrictions along the way. In Wang Yongchen's account on the work on the Nu Jiang, she describes using her network to build high level and elite support,

After I know that the whole country is setting up hydropower, we found some scientists to explain why we need to preserve the Nu River...and in 2003 September we had a big conference in China, and in this conference I told more people about this issue. In this conference we had a lot of film stars. (Interview with Wang, March 2016)

In her account, Wang notes working with government officials, scientists, and film stars in 2003, later moving on to expand her network to high profile journalists, international NGOs, overseas governments and the IUCN. She identifies that she was able to successfully work on the hydropower issue despite the challenges involved,

Before in 2003 we were thinking we couldn't do something, we are just journalists, we produce articles, we are NGOs, we couldn't influence policy, but 13 years after, so I think maybe we can do something. After we met each other in Chiang Mai, after seeing my film, a lot of people said congratulations, thank you for keeping the river. I think maybe it's not easy, but we can do. (Interview with Wang, March 2016)

As well as class and ethnicity, gender also played a role in the political opportunities available to the Nu Jiang campaigners. Whereas Wang Yongchen had a high profile role in the campaign and was able to make alliances with key elites, most of the other women involved played lower profile roles such as raising awareness and organizing activities; meanwhile men predominantly mainly played the role of 'experts' who were brought in to further bolster the campaign and increase its influence with allies in the government. One of the women activists who was highly involved in the campaign but did not take a high profile stated,

The women's role in the campaign was to make it more popular and raise popular awareness. Wang Yongchen is a symbol of the campaign, she is emotional, she kept it going for 10 years....Men argue about the theoretical dimensions, while women did the practical work – writing articles, organizing events, trips...seventy percent of the "knowledge" work is done by men – on dams, science, etc. Men went to the EIA meetings, talked to the government. Women generated activities. Wang Yongchen invited men such as geologists to be experts on the trip to Salween. Men were more likely to do the

negotiations also, such as former government officials, they could also provide knowledge on what they learned working. (Interview 11, December 2015)

While being a woman was not a hindrance to accessing political opportunities, according to those involved it was mainly men who dealt directly with elites and decision makers. One woman environmentalist who also worked closely with the campaign in its earlier years described her opinion of this gender dynamic,

Wang Yongchen, she is...very emotional and I think her emotion really gets out and affects people...I think for outreach to the common people, to the general public she's very effective but on the opposite if we want to convince government or academics maybe we need people like Yu Xiaogang who can present arguments more rationally. (Interview 17, March 2016)

Therefore, we can say that political opportunities were accessed in this case through the use of gendered strategies. While women took on the ‘emotional’ and ‘practical’ roles of organizing events, building alliances and public sympathy for the campaign, men persuaded other male politicians and officials through ‘rational’ and ‘knowledge’ work. This division of labor was not consciously decided, or necessarily hierarchical, as the previous female campaigner described, “it [the division of labor] was collaborative though- more do what you can do” (Interview 11, December 2015). Rather, it was the result of wider social dynamics that result in NGO work being predominantly female, and political and scientific work being predominantly male spaces, as well as a rationalist worldview that deems scientific evidence more credible than emotional or personal testimony to some policy makers.

Therefore, while female campaigners such as Wang Yongchen as well-connected urban Han professionals could access political opportunities through alliances with elite decision makers, and take advantage of division among elites, men with the status of policy makers and scientists were also key to making the case convincing to government officials, thus demonstrating class, ethnic, and gender dynamics at play.

8.6.2 State Repression: How Identity and Location Matter

This section highlights how the activists involved in the Nu Jiang campaign were able to operate in a less-restricted space as linked to their position, and the state’s propensity for repression *on this particular issue* and *for some of the individuals* involved in campaigning. In this case, the state’s restrictions were weak enough to allow for the possibility of a successful campaign.

To explain this, it is necessary to separate the response of the local Nu Jiang authorities, the Yunnan government and the central Beijing government. Throughout the Nu Jiang campaign, a spectrum of repression existed where the degree of repression increased with the degree of ‘local-ness’ of the individuals involved.

While local, ethnic minority community members faced and still continue to face strong threats and intimidation for speaking about the project, Kunming-based Han environmentalists faced strong pressure but were still able to continue to be active on the issue, while Han Beijing environmentalists faced relatively low repression. Class and ethnicity, as well as location, strongly influenced political opportunity in this case, as demonstrated in interviews and field visits.

At the most local prefectural level, Nu Jiang community members, who are ethnic minorities, continue to be pressured by local authorities not to speak with outsiders about the project, as I saw and experienced while visiting the region. Once our group entered the Nu Jiang prefecture, we were followed by a group of police and local authorities at all times. During meetings with local people along the Nu Jiang, the police took videos and photographs of all our interactions with local people, and specifically instructed the local residents we met with not to talk about the project with us.

Without being able to ask the local authorities directly, we can only speculate why repression is most extreme at the local level; one environmental worker believed it was because of the local authorities' conviction that the dams would be the best solution for economic development and poverty alleviation in the region (Grumbine 2010). Many interviewees also noted that local police and local authorities are known in China to use more repressive tactics than national authorities.

Another reason is because of ethnic politics in China. One NGO staff noted that the majority of the local government officials were Han while the local people were ethnic minorities. Given the context of ethnic activism by Tibetan and Uighur groups and the state's response to such activism, it seems likely that any political activism involving minorities would be seen as more threatening by authorities. The interviewee further explained that the National Security Law passed in China in 2015 makes illegal any activity which could be labeled as divisive between Han and ethnic minority people, and is another tool used to prevent local ethnic minority activism as well as Han activists working together with ethnic minorities (Interview 16, March 2016).

NGOs, particularly from Yunnan, are aware of the challenges for participation in activism for local communities, and frustrated by the situation. One female campaigner in Yunnan explained her experience trying to work with local communities along the Nu Jiang: "[We] did some workshops with local people, brought people to see the Manwan dam, did trainings for local people on dam impacts, law and so on but they (the local people) cannot actually act. They were threatened a lot, the local government is too strong" (Interview 11, December 2015).

Dr. Yu also detailed his experience trying to organize local communities on the Nu Jiang, explaining that the villagers he had worked with in the past were later resettled under the guise of the "New Rural Development Program" into much larger houses than they had previously lived in, and then strategically controlled, as the resettlement village has a police gate which monitors any visitors to the village. Following their relocation, it has become more difficult to continue communication with those villagers, although he continues to visit the area on a regular basis.

Furthermore, his attempts to bring local residents to national or international events in the past were prevented by local authorities refusing permission for the villagers to travel (Interview with Dr. Yu, March 2016).

Interviewees in Yunnan also expressed frustration at downstream ENGOs and funders who expected them to work with grassroots communities in the Nu Jiang, the Yunnan-based campaigner stating that “they need to understand, it’s totally unlike downstream (countries), where people can claim their rights” (Interview 11, Dec 2015). Another Beijing-based environmentalist, comparing their work to downstream anti-dam groups in Thailand and Myanmar, stated with disappointment, “it is my dream to work together with local communities on the Nu Jiang, actually” (Interview 13, March 2016). At the same time, as discussed in the previous section, while local repression may be the main reason for the lack of local participation, the campaign has also faced challenges in building trust and relationships with local communities.

Moving to the provincial level, the most active ENGO in Yunnan Province on the Nu Jiang, Green Watershed faced repression from the Yunnan authorities, perhaps to a lesser degree than the local communities but still of a significant nature. Following the dam’s suspension in 2004, Yunnan authorities retaliated by confiscating Dr. Yu’s passport and seizing Green Watershed’s computers (Büsgen 2006: 41); Dr. Yu also lost his position in the Academy of Social Sciences (Interview with Dr. Yu, March 2016). While some academics interpreted the higher level of repression faced by Green Watershed as the result of their more ‘radical’ or ‘oppositional’ tactics compared to Beijing groups (Economy 2005; Teets 2014), the Yunnan-based campaigner firmly rejected this explanation, arguing instead that “Green Watershed did get more punishment because they are a local group and the Yunnan government can control them” (Interview 11, December 2015). Teets herself also notes that the Yunnan and central government took diverging positions towards ENGOs, stating that while “Beijing allowed the formation of more autonomous groups, Yunnan developed more sophisticated tools of state control” (2014: 82). As a local Yunnan organization, Green Watershed played a key role in communicating with local communities and gathering evidence, but was also subject to heightened repression from Yunnan provincial authorities which has continually limited their work at the local level.

In contrast, Han environmentalists from Beijing were able to openly advocate on the Nu Jiang issue. They faced relatively less repression for their work, apart from being followed and monitored while visiting the Nu Jiang region (Interview with Wang Yongchen, March 2016). Of course, being followed while visiting local communities for 13 years is not trivial, thus the term “relatively less.” Their limited state repression is a political opportunity which has had a significant outcome on the campaign’s ability to sustain and continue at a national and international level over the years.

It should be noted that political opportunity is a dynamic issue, and even Beijing-based groups’ ability to work on such issues is now challenged by political developments as of 2016 including the Overseas NGO Law, which severely limits the work of all domestic and international NGOs in China (Wong 2016).

Nevertheless, during the time of this campaign, the ethnic and class backgrounds of the Nu Jiang environmentalists as middle-class Han in Kunming and Beijing had a significant impact on their experience of limited repression.

8.7 Conclusion and Synthesis

As Whittier writes, “systemic inequalities of gender, race, class and sexuality shape both movements and the institutions they confront” (2002: 295). By analyzing how identity and social dynamics shape social movements, we are given greater context to understand the strategies and tactics, as well as successes and failures, of civil society.

While none of the interviewees, nor this chapter, argue that gender, class or ethnicity was the sole or primary reason for the success of the campaign, identity played an important part in the strategies used and ultimate outcome. Ethnicity and class influenced the political opportunities available, as the Nu Jiang environmentalists were able to mobilize popular awareness, and high level elite and political support for their agenda and experienced limited political repression to a degree that they could continue their work, in a way that would be far more difficult for ethnic minority, rural and grassroots environmentalists to do, due to the social and political constraints outlined in this chapter. Meanwhile, as mainly Han women, the Nu Jiang campaign was also shaped by gender dynamics, as accessing these opportunities was also done through collaborating with predominantly male policy makers, scientists and geologists with the status of ‘experts.’

While this chapter argues that civil society is influenced by social dynamics, this also raises the point that civil society may in turn “reproduce as well as transform gender inequalities, structures and belief systems” (Kuumba 2001: 2–3), and I would add, class and ethnic inequalities as well. The Nu Jiang campaign, ultimately seems to both transform and reproduce social inequalities. On the one hand, the campaign can be read as an example of those with more opportunity using their power to advocate on behalf of those who are unable to speak out. It is fair to say that the ENGOs have successfully used their relatively privileged position to bring the concerns of local communities to a national and international audience. This viewpoint is evidenced by the ongoing repression of local communities in the Nu Jiang which does not allow them to speak openly about the dam projects without reprisal. At least, the campaign brings the voices of the affected communities to be heard by others, and in this way makes a contribution towards greater social equality in China.

On the other hand, without local people’s participation, it is very difficult to know whether the campaign adequately took into consideration the voices of local people impacted by the proposed dam project. Without affected people’s participation and leadership, social inequalities are intrinsically reproduced at some level through the campaign itself. In terms of gender, the campaign makes significant progress for women’s leadership and women’s representation, yet existing gender

inequalities determine that scientists and policy makers who are predominantly male are ultimately those conferred with the status of ‘experts’ with the ability to persuade decision makers.

Due to the dynamics of power, privilege, and repression in China, there are no easy or simple solutions to any of these points raised. While the aim of those involved in social movements such as the Nu Jiang campaign may include an intent towards social justice and leadership of affected communities, this case illustrates why political and social contexts and challenges in China can make it ultimately difficult to fulfill such commitments. Nevertheless, the environmental groups in China must be lauded for finding ways to effect policy change and having ultimately won a significant victory to keep the Nu River flowing freely for future generations.

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