

The State versus *Public(s)* in the People's Republic of China

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Public interest anthropology (PIA) encourages attention to 'publics', particularly where a specific idea of a public is said to be represented, or where publics are said to be formed or produced. The challenge with a concept like **public(s)** is not only its inherent complexity (the difficulty of defining what a public is and isn't, how publics are formed, how and where we are to find them, and so on), but also its 'coupling' with terms that circulate in popular and academic discourse (such as public opinion, public good, public awareness, public consciousness, and the like). This point is important because these notions not only inform our own understandings but also crop up in our everyday use (see Calhoun 2002, and especially Warner 2002). Employing a PIA perspective prompts us to consider not only specific publics in our research—their formation, and their deployment—but also how interests are generated and then attached, if you will, to certain publics or said to be representative of them. Critical to this understanding is the insertion of the state and its role in these actions, which is considered here through the state-sponsorship of environmental actors in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Environmentalism presents a particularly good case because publics are being directly addressed (in the sense of gaining public support for specific initiatives); they are also being discursively created with regard to environmental issues as well as being invoked by various actors (in the sense of promoting an issue because it is in "the public's interest"). Most importantly, pronounced public discourse and broader awareness about environmental issues create a situation dissimilar to that of other issues in China, rendering these publics (perhaps) easier to observe. Environmentalism also underscores the necessity of a global view, examining the discourses of a presumed world interest—such as development, human rights, and, as it is currently being campaigned, the war on terrorism—that are strategically deployed by specific actors in specific contexts. Reference to global legitimacy, then, is a resource in creating, bolstering, and even discrediting publics.

Defining, finding and describing what are for the most part newly emerging publics remains a challenge, as has been demonstrated in works that look at China's gendered publics (see Yang 1999).¹ One major difficulty is the dominance of the largest, concretized "the public." Public interest anthropology, via its attentiveness to publics, has the potential to bring into focus the power embedded in this type of public and the ways in which a public is enacted to bring about certain ends. Thus, we can begin to explore the historical, social, economic, and political dimensions of this singular public while not preempting an opportunity to 'find' other publics but rather focus on the manner in which they

¹¹ Another part of this challenge is reconciling theoretical ideas of 'publics' that rest primarily on Western ideas. Works on Chinese conceptions of public(s) include the following: (Lee 1993, Rowe 1990, Wang, Lee, and Fischer 1994).

are interrelated. One other obstacle, I believe, is a preoccupation with arenas such as civil society that are familiar to us, in order to ‘find’ these publics and voices that will then demonstrate that China is “on the right path” with regard to the development of civil society and, here, its environmental agenda.

There is, of course, a tendency to overstate the strength of the Chinese state and neglect the diversity of political practices that are a part of the state and may at times work against it. I focus on the State nonetheless, as in the current situation where state discourse shapes public discourse not only in its attempts to control it but also in being the foil against which critiques are staged thereby ‘setting the terms for debate’ (Brownell 1999). The relationship between the state, ‘the public,’ and the environment is discussed generally in terms of the relationship of the state to the ‘general public,’ who is perceived as lacking both a strong influence on policy formation and any real environmental awareness (Lo and Leung 2000). This sort of understanding is often supplemented by statements to the effect that the (undefined) public views it as the state’s duty to address issues that are ‘for the public good.’ This attitude is attributed to the combined legacy of socialism and Confucianism (see Hallding 2002, Shapiro 2001). Interactions often remain ‘top-down’ with local or regional governments deciding and implementing programs for the public to participate in such as the campaign in Beijing to hold a “Green Olympics” in 2008 (though many analysts note that there are an increasing number of individuals and citizen groups who initiate their own actions). Resistance from the government remains to increased public involvement, particularly that which is deemed to be independent from the state (Hallding 2002, Lo and Leung 2000).

Public interest then is very much collapsed with the national interest that may be defined in other ways—in relation to economic statistics, the growth in GNP alongside issues of external legitimacy. In China, like in other countries, an ongoing campaign to define what is in the public good highlights what is at stake (here I’m thinking primarily of social stability). When interests are constructed as a concern of a unitary public (like ‘the people’) silencing of other concerns occurs (see Trouillot 1995). This construction inevitably leads to the glossing over of some groups. One example is that of migrants who are described as detrimental to the environment because of presumed lack of attachment to place. In some cases the debasement of migrants goes even further in that migrants are criminalized, effectively pushing them away from any opportunity at ‘entering’ the public if that is seen as a ‘legal’ space. The negative characterization of migrants as having little ‘moral responsibility’ where environmental issues are concerned is furthermore picked up by the UNDP in a recent report (cited within this paper) on green development in China and ‘reinserted’ into Chinese and global public debates with the endorsement of the international community.²

Academics, policy makers and the local and international media have been quick to focus on alternative arenas for the voicing of public concerns, including the development of GONGOs (government-organized NGOs), environmental hotlines, petition filing systems, public opinion polling, and the developments within the media itself, such as newspapers devoted to

² This situation may be changing in response to modifications in the household registration system.

environmental issues and greater freedom in the content of editorials.³ Finding publics and interests in areas like these may present greater challenges since the readymade advocates of publics—NGOs—exist in a truncated form. The case of GONGOs and opinion polling have been used to illuminate growing ‘relaxation’ within the state but have also highlighted the manner in which the state also benefits from their existence, specifically giving pretenses of accountability and independence of interest-formation, while at the same time allowing them to learn general opinions from which to form policy without creating instability. The fact that the public interest is, in a sense, based on these government-involved public forms provides the government with control over their predictability.

The government, concerned with the critical nature of environmental problems, continues to drive many of the “public interests” in the arena of environmentalism, though now often in conjunction with international agencies and organizations. Added into this mixture of interests and publics then are a variety of global constituencies (e.g. development agencies, corporations, supranational agencies, etc.). It has been suggested that the government “avoids the appearance of overly controlling these GONGOs in order to attract international support” (Wu 2002:54). And international participation with GONGOs is also suggested to be one of the causal elements for GONGOs increasing autonomy from the state. The act of labeling the Beijing Olympics “green” is also indicative of the state’s search for legitimacy within the global community, where it takes head on its environmental degradation, which is largely criticized by other nations, by making it “green” and combining a venue that is often used to showcase a country to a global audience. Disturbing to environmental activists (and others) was the reliance on for-profit environmental consultants to help shape Beijing’s Olympic bid, which may signal the privatization of environmental work in China (Hildebrandt 2002). In other cases, exposure to environmental information and concerns is also more informal through other forms of media like the Internet. Informal exposure may lead to what Shapiro has noted in reference to Chinese (educated) youths’ concern over the environment; that they “yearn to join the world community, to become global citizens, and to link with their peers overseas” (2001:210). By tapping into environmentalism as a world interest, they become part of this global community, its citizens and equal to their peers.

In summary, of critical concern to public interest anthropology then is a consideration of the state and its relation to “the public.” The process of thinking about publics and interests and “public interests” helps us to avoid getting caught in the rut of state/society division. China, by no means unique in the world, draws out how these processes are multifaceted by demonstrating the degree of state involvement in monitoring, if not always acting against, what appears in the public domain to a much greater degree than in some other countries—in addition, of course, to claiming the prerogative of defining ‘what is in the public’s interest.’ That being said tensions and contradictions within the state (and for that matter, within various publics) obviously exist. For instance local

³ That these developments signal a degree of relaxation on the part of the government is not under dispute.

environmental agencies with little real clout are learning to use representations of 'public interests' to garner further power within the larger state hierarchy. Villagers advancing their own interests are attentive to the limitations but at the same time are forcing open opportunities for participation and making claims through a discourse of rights to something that has yet to emerge (O'Brien 2001:408). The government is not the only one to draw upon history to legitimize its interests. Uses of discourses from the Mao era are used to critique present concerns because they remain a "safe space for articulating alternate voices and expectations of the future" (Zhang 2002:326). The state's own position vis-à-vis the public is no longer as clear as it was before China's market reforms. Although it continues to represent the interests of the public, and here I'm quoting Lisa Rofel, "it is less clear in this age of late socialism what it [the state] is said to be representing" (Rofel 1994). Clearly articulated interest in publics and interest can facilitate moving through this 'tangle' by examining the negotiation of public interests within and between governments with varying degrees of responses from "the people," by highlighting the manner in which multiple interests often are collapsed into the single category of "the public interest," and by underscoring how equally problematic 'state interests' (like the war on terror) become public interests.

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