

From Theory to Practice: Changing Conceptions of Hegemony to Hegemony Analysis in Environmental Governance

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Abstract. This paper illustrates the theoretical development of ‘hegemony’, which emerged as a slogan during the Russian Social-Democratic movement from the late 1890s, then informed by Antonio Gramsci’s theory, and later critically developed by Robert Cox from the dimension of international relation, and reconceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe with discourse analysis, and recently broadened by David Levy to environmental governance domain. Since environmental issue has been a new threat to hegemony, the paper focuses on the practical perspective sensitive to the context of China, and discusses changes of hegemony among government, corporation and non-governmental organization (NGO) in the development of environmental governance in China. With the social contexts of development in China after the establishment of the New China in 1949, based on a timeline, it concludes that the feature of hegemony in the development of China’s environmental governance has changed from highly prescriptive planning in the planned economy period to government supervision in the market economy period, then towards tripartite cooperation recently.

Keywords: Hegemony, environmental governance, China, state, business, NGO.

1 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘hegemony’ firstly emerged as a slogan during the Russian Social-Democratic movement from the late 1890s to 1917 to describe leading force of the working class fighting for democracy in the earlier Marxist theory (Anderson, 1976; Hoffman, 1984). Then Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony as not only a unison of economic and political aims but also intellectual and moral unity, in which civil society stands between the economic structure and the state, made the notion of hegemony as an explicit concept in Marxist social theory (Gramsci, 1971; Adamson, 1980; Mouffe, 1979). In the early 1980, Robert Cox merged mainstream international relation approaches with hegemony, which is related to the emergence of neo-Gramscian perspective, although such a theoretical extension faced many critiques (Cox, 1981 & 1983; Germain and Kenny, 1998; Bieler and Morton, 2004). Then post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe incorporated a discourse analysis approach to illustrate the new conception of hegemony as a form of social relation in which ideology is fundamental, and developed the neo-Gramscian discourse theory to a new level (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Boucher, 2008). In the past twenty years, with deepening of industrialization globally, emergence of environmental pollution as a global problem and a crisis of governance, has increasingly threatened the modern hegemony. David Levy introduced a neo-Gramscian theoretical approach to environmental governance, involving state agencies, business and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in contestation over structures and process environmental governance (Levy, 2005 & 2008; Levy and Egan, 2003; Levy and Newell, 2002 & 2005).

In terms of illustrations on theoretical development of the term hegemony, this paper focuses on hegemony changing in the development of environmental governance in China from the New China established in 1949 to now, within a neo-Gramscian frame. In the first

timeline stage, from the 1950s to 1980s, China has experienced a long period of planned economy, in which the whole society was under highly prescriptive central planning with the central guideline of extensive economic growth to maximize industrial outputs. Then after the 1978 Reform, China has gradually transformed to a market-oriented economy with intensive economic growth, and relaxed party control over the economy, society and ultimately over public discourse. In recent ten years, after the 'Scientific Development Concept' proposed by the Hu Jintao government in 2003 in China, pursuing a balance between economic growth and sustainable development become the new theme nowadays in China. During the past six decades, the Chinese government, corporation and NGO have played different roles in the development of China's environmental governance system.

From theory to practice, this paper begins by developing the arguments for changing conceptions of hegemony as well as theoretical development of neo-Gramscian approach, bringing these perspectives together to discuss environmental problem as a new crisis of governance or hegemonic relations among the state, the capital and civil society. Then this paper carries out hegemony analysis on the changing power relations among the state, business and NGO in environmental governance in China with a neo-Gramscian consideration.

2 THEORETICAL EVOLUTION OF A NEO-GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE OF HEGEMONY

2.1 Hegemony in earlier Marxist theory

The term hegemony, with a long prior history, emerged as one of the most important political slogans within the Russian Social-Democratic movement from the late 1890s to 1917 (Anderson, 1976). During that period, hegemony, implied by Lenin, indicates working class as a leading force in the fight for democracy (Hoffman, 1984). In political theory, the term hegemony, first emerged in a Marxist context in the writings of *Georgi Plekhanov (1957-1981)*, refers to the power of one state over others (Klimechi and Willmott, 2011).

Before Gramsci, the notion of hegemony had not been a key part as an explicit concept in Marxist social theory. Marx's writing *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in 1869 shows his notion of hegemony (Hall, 1980). Marx proposes that the state acts in a 'totalitarian way' upon civil society, and distinguishes notions of the state and the civil society as 'the state enmeshes, controls, regulates, supervises and regiments civil society from the most all-embracing expressions of its life down to its most insignificant motions, from its most general modes of existence down to the private life of individuals' (Marx, 1973, p. 186). With the idea of the alienation of the state apparatus from the civil society, Marx treats the state as a component of man's self-estrangement along with labor, money, property and religion (Bocock, 1986).

However, as stated by Carnoy (1984), compared with Marx's deep analysis of political economy, his theory of politics was implicit in his writings. Marx did not fully develop his ideas about the state since he had planned to write a volume of *Capital* on the state but finally never done, which is seen as a serious lacuna in Marxism (McLellan, 1971). As pointed out by Lefebvre (1968), although Marx discussed a lot around the nature and role of the state, the bourgeois state, and the transition state as the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is hard to find out a complete and coherent theoretical system of the state in the Marx's writings.

Lenin's conception of the proletariat as hegemonic as the 'ideological leader of the democratic process', as Buci-Glucksmann (1980, p. 177) points out, can be viewed as part of the classical Marxist tradition, according to numerous comments in Marx and Engels' political writings. The advance of Lenin's notion of hegemony over previous discussions was to address the role of theoretical leadership. Lenin viewed hegemony as the organised and disciplined proletarian leadership of a broadly based movement, involving all classes and strata in, with the vanguard party as a tribune of the people. After the 1917 Revolution, Lenin wrote the book *State and Revolution*, and regarded the state as an instrument of class rule,

which is the 'product and the manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms' (Lenin, 1933, p. 12). The state arises when class antagonism cannot be reconciled. Lenin hoped the state eventually withering away after the Russian Revolution, and revolutions would spread in Europe. But the German revolution's failure, the second 'great Patriotic War', the rise of Nazism and then the Cold War maintained a strong state presence in the Soviet Union (Bocock, 1986). Although the term of hegemony is seldom used during that period, its theme was deeply embedded in earlier Marxist theory (Adamson, 1980).

2.2 Hegemony in Gramsci's theory

The illustrations of hegemony in the Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* introduce new vision to the traditional Marxist perspectives of hegemony. The advance which Gramsci made over Lenin was to develop a strategy for Western European societies, since Gramsci made a distinction between 'a war of movement' in Russia and 'a war of position' that was feasible and applicable in Western Europe (Bocock, 1986, p. 27). Based on a direct assault on the state, 'a war of position' aims to achieve hegemony for the proletariat in civil society before the capture of state power by the Communist Party. Gramsci described how modern capitalist societies were organised in the past and present, and extended the concept of hegemony from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie as a feature of class rule in general (Anderson, 1976; Buci-Glucksmann, 1980; Simon, 1982; Hoffman, 1984; Carnoy, 1984).

In the reproduction of social relations, as pointed out by Adamson (1980), the classical Marxism failed to pay sufficient attention to noneconomic factors like ideology and culture. Marx and Engels treated ideology narrowly as a belief system rather than being sensitive to its cultural manifestations. Gramsci's theory, with the new conception of hegemony, can surpass classical Marxism in the wide variety of cultural manifestations where ideology appears and in the idealistic concern with culture as well as in the complex interconnections between culture and politics. For Gramsci, the real power of ruling system does not lie in the violence of the ruling class or the coercive power of the state apparatus, but in the civil society's acceptance of the ruling class' worldview (Carnoy, 1984). Hegemony in Gramsci, as 'intellectual and moral leadership whose principal constituting elements are consent and persuasion' (Fontana, 1993, p.140), is at the heart of Gramsci's conceptions of the intellectual, the party and the formation of a historical bloc through which an ascendant class roots its political leadership in the realm of production (Hoffman, 1984).

As Gramsci states, 'between the economic structure and the state, with its legislation and coercion, stands civil society' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 208). The term 'economic' refers to the dominant mode of production in a territory at a particular moment, which consists of the technical means of production and the social relations of production. The state connotes the means of violence in a given territory with state-funded bureaucracies together. The civil society refers to the other organizations supported and run by people outside of the other two major spheres, rather than part of the processes of material production in the economy, or part of state-funded organisations (Bocock, 1986). According to Adamson (1980), Gramsci conceptualised the state as political society and civil society rather than as the equivalent of political society. Gramsci characterizes the state as hegemony, close to the question of consent, 'protected by the armour of coercion' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263). More than most previous Marxists, that legitimate consent was regarded as the predominant means of political control in Gramsci (Adamson, 1980).

However, there is still some confusion about hegemony in Gramsci's theory. On one hand, Gramsci seems to try to distinguish the state from the civil society, and identifies the state as the source of coercive power while the civil society as the field site of hegemonic leadership within a society (Bocock, 1986). On the other hand, Gramsci tries to integrate the two concepts of state and civil society together to understand the 'integral state': political society plus civil society as the combination of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). As conceptualised by Gramsci, the integral state involves not only the means of coercion such as police force and army, but the means of establishing hegemonic leadership in civil society as well.

2.3 Cox's critical view of hegemony

In the 1980s, situated within a historical materialist problematic of social transformation, and deploying many of the insights of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, a crucial break emerged in the work of Robert Cox from mainstream international relation approaches to hegemony, related neo-Gramscian perspective emerged (Bieler and Morton, 2004). By rethinking the concepts of civil society, hegemony and historic bloc in Gramsci, Cox further illustrated a critical theory of hegemony, world order and historical change to question the prevailing order of the world in his two papers in 1981 and 1983. Cox broadens the domain of hegemony from a neo-Gramscian perspective and regards that the conception of hegemony as 'a fit between power, ideas and institutions' makes it possible to solve some problems in the arguments that state dominance is necessary for a stable international order (Cox, 1981).

In the Cox's conception of hegemony, it refers to 'a form of dominance', but appears more as an expression of broadly based consent so that 'dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony' (Cox, 1981, p. 139). By means of the analysis of historical structure, Cox (1981) illustrates the notions of civil society and the state as well as the world order with the consideration of three elements: ideas as intersubjective meanings as well as collective images of world order; material capabilities as accumulated resources; and institutions as means of stabilizing a particular order, which are seen as amalgams of the previous two elements. Historically, hegemonies founded by powerful states have undergone a complete social and economic revolution. World hegemony is thus described as combination of 'a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure', and expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms (Cox, 1983, p. 172).

However, neo-Gramscian approaches in Cox's extensions of hegemony in Gramsci to international relations studies are criticized as too unfashionably Marxist in Marxist rigour and as being lack of historical materialist rigour in neo-Gramscian framework (Bieler and Morton, 2004). Germain and Kenny (1998) point out that there are seldom attempts to explore the nature of Gramsci's work and engage with it in the methodological coherence of the Cox-Gramsci theory. At least three steps should be identified initially, since critical engagements with Gramsci's approaches are long overdue: first, acknowledging the interpretive difficulties surrounding both the appropriation and application of Gramsci's work; second, questioning how far Gramsci's concepts can be suitable for the international domain use and world order today; third, building up a more critical engagement with Gramsci's method. Cox regards the world hegemony as an external-expansion activity led by a dominant social class with confirmed domestic hegemony. Drainville (1994) criticizes the over-estimation of the hegemony of transnational capital within world order by neo-Gramscian perspectives. According to Burnham (1991), the neo-Gramscian hegemony developed by Cox, fails to identify the core aspect of the capital relation, which is pre-occupied with the articulation of ideology. Thus, Cox's criticisms of Gramsci's hegemony finally move to 'a slide towards an idealist account of the determination of economic policy' (Burnham, 1991, p. 81).

2.4 Hegemony in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory

Post-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe employed discourse analysis to re-conceptualize the notion of hegemony in Gramsci, and developed the neo-Gramscian discourse theory to a new level. In the early work of Laclau and Mouffe, they integrated Gramsci's conceptions of particular historical events and contemporary post-structuralism, and addressed the importance of non-class ideology and the popular democracy. For example, as early as 1977, in Laclau's *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, the conflicts between the working class and certain sectors of the bourgeoisie stem from politics and ideology, rather than the dominant level of production relations, which should not belong to 'class struggle', but 'classes in struggle' (Laclau, 1977). The popular-democratic interpellation, as the 'domain of ideological class struggle par excellence', is more important in the whole ideological structure (Laclau, 1977, p. 109). In *Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci*, Mouffe (1979) pointed out that politic power can be viewed as inter-class collective ideology through

ideological struggle. Democracy, as a necessity of a bourgeois ideology, and in the young Marx, 'as the terrain of a permanent revolution begun by the bourgeoisie but concluded by the proletariat' became a class ideology (Mouffe, 1979, p. 174). However, Laclau and Mouffe, in their earlier writings, still regarded politics and economics significant to ideological struggles with thought of economics inevitably determining class politics eventually (Bieler and Morton, 2004; Boucher, 2008).

The neo-Gramscian theory, greatly developed by Laclau and Mouffe in the later 1985's book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, directs attention to new interpretations and notions of hegemony, intellectual and moral leadership, war of position, historical bloc, and collective will by means of post-Marxian discourse theory. Laclau and Mouffe develop a post-Marxist analysis of hegemony, and view hegemony as a form of social relation, in which different kinds of social forces hang together to create a social ideology (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). For Laclau and Mouffe's Gramscian perspective, by introducing discourse analysis, hegemony acts as a condition of possibility for ideology, politics, economics and civil society, which is politically constructed and contingent.

2.5 Environment as new threat to hegemony in Levy's neo-Gramscian theory

Since the emergence of environment as a global problem and environmental problems as a crisis of governance, especially after the 1980s, environmental governance issues have been a profound political process, and non-state actors, business and civil society, as significant political struggle over complex social and political systems, have been crucial parts within a neo-Gramscian framework for environmental governance (Levy and Newell, 2002; Levy and Egan, 2003; Levy and Newell, 2005). Gramsci's theory of hegemony presents his conception of the capitalist state, which is divided between 'political society' as the arena of political institutions and 'civil society' as the private or non-state sectors, providing 'a conceptual linkage between corporate strategy and international relations in constructing a political economy of international environmental governance (Levy and Newell, 2005, p. 48).

The neo-Gramscian approach provides a perspective which is theoretically grounded, as Levy and Egan (2003) points out, reflecting discursive and organisational dimensions of power within complex social systems. Gramsci's hegemony in contemporary international relations, as concluded by Levy and Newell, is still meaningful in illustrating the particular discursive relations which integrate a network of actors.

The neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony rebuilt by David Levy provides a basis for a more critical approach to corporate strategy for sustaining corporate dominance and legitimacy in the face of global environmental challenges. Corporate activities, dominating each step of the value chain, can serve as 'powerful engines of change toward addressing environmental concerns' (Levy and Newell, 2005, p. 1). Corporations develop strategies to improve market and technological positioning, sustain social legitimacy and influence government policy in international environmental politics.

The neo-Gramscian perspective of hegemony also provides a flexible approach to understand the increasingly crucial role of civil society in establishing legitimacy and building alliance as one of the significant political struggles facing to ever more serious global environmental issues and relatively passive corporate strategies (Levy and Egan, 2003). Gramsci's notion of civil society retains its validity if emergent international NGOs play a dual role as 'semi-autonomous arenas of cultural and ideological struggle' and as 'key allies in securing hegemonic stability' (Levy and Newell, 2005, p. 54). According to Evans (2012), sustainable development addresses the normative idea which citizens have the ability to impact how the places where they live are managed, stressing local action and community inclusion. There will be no sustainability without a potential for civil society to take control (Irwin, 1995).

In short, as environmental problems being a new threat to hegemony, a neo-Gramscian perspective of hegemony incorporates non-state actors such as business and NGO into governance system, and values their increasingly important roles in environmental governance.

3 HEGEMONY IN CHINA'S ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

3.1 Hegemony under the context of planned economy

From the 1950s to the early 1990s, China, following the soviet-style approach to the economic system, had experienced a long period of 'planned economy'. As a relatively backward country in the world in the 1950s, China adopted such a wholly government-led development model to promote the progress of industrialisation. Such a centrally planned economy initiated and guided the process of industrialisation in China for about thirty years. During the first five years in that period, the Chinese Communists had carried out a 'socialist transformation', transforming the 'neo-democratic economy', in which planning and market coexist, to the 'public-ownership economy', in which planning and administrative control dominated the market (Wu, 2003). This five-year reform in China transformed nearly all private enterprises to the joint state-and-private ownership business, and then gradually nationalized their means of production thoroughly. During this period, there was no NGO allowed for surviving, not to mention the involvement of civil society in governance, even large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) rarely had management power in their corporate governance. The main feature of planned economy was the highly prescriptive plan from the central state, which controlled the business sector in China, determining numbers, varieties and prices of products, employment and wage levels, investment directions, proportions of consumption and investment, etc., and arranged free medical treatment, education and housing for the whole Chinese society.

Adopting such an economic system had deeply historical, political and social roots. At the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, China had just ended the long war period and achieved a truly national independence with the establishment of a strong government 'the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China'. The establishment of the New China in 1949 marked the end of a '100-year history of semi-colonial, semi-feudal society' in the Old China. At that time, due to the outbreak of the Korean War, China's national security was still threatened. In addition, China had relatively lower level of industrial development with the huge number of population, and faced serious market failure with scant agricultural surplus and tight supply and demand. Due to very limited funds and technical staff, dispersed local governments and private investments were hard to expand production scale and improve technical level (Wu, 2003). Under governance of the powerful but new government in China, pursuing for maintaining national security, establishing independent industrial system and promoting economic growth, it is natural for China to choose a government-led development model, and take the road of a planned economy.

Although it seems reasonable for China to take the road of planned economy in order to heal the wounds of war and recover the national economy, over time, such an outdated economic system appeared many problems, especially on environmental governance. During that period, the development of heavy industries in China had been put at the primary position in the process of national development, with the guiding principle of maximising outputs in order to 'surpass the UK and the US' in industrial outputs. Under the central guideline of realising industrialization rapidly at any cost in China, the central state required different levels of local governments in China to clean up all the environmental messes for the SOEs, and SOEs were merely committed to maximizing economic outputs without any environmental concerns. As a result, environment had become the biggest victim of such an extensive economic growth mode.

With the only goal of transiting China from an agricultural country to an industrial country, and from a neo-democratic country to a socialist country, the central state manifested its intellectual and moral hegemony through centrally prescriptive plans on constructing a socialist society, developing national economy and improving people's living standards. The class consciousness of the subordinate groups in China during that period, with the only faith 'without the Communist Party, there would be no New China', had fully obeyed the consent of the present ruling class, and fully followed both economic and moral ways developed by the dominant group – the Communist Party of China (CPC). However, environmental

governance, without too many influences on maintaining hegemonic stability among the state, business and the public and promoting economic growth in the planned economy, had been ignored by the CPC. Thus under the predominant influence of the new but powerful central state in China, without the direct and clear central planning on sustainable development, both SOEs and local governments were difficult to be involved into environmental governance during the planned economy.

3.2 Hegemony under the context of market economy

After thirty-year central planning, China had still remained a poor country (Dong, 2003). Due to economy's disappointing growth in the past twenty years, beginning in 1978, the Chinese Communists began to implement a series of far-reaching economic reforms, transforming the economic system gradually towards a 'market economy', in which non-state enterprises were allowed to survive and compete with SOEs in the Chinese market (McMillan and Naughton, 1992; Nolan and Ash, 1995; Wang, 1994). Tenev and Zhang (2002) divided the market-oriented reform process since 1978 into two periods: first, from 1979 to 1992, by reintroducing markets and incentives within the domain of direct state ownership and control, market forces began to work together with central administrative plans via a dual pricing system; second, from 1993 to the early 2000s, this period had been featured with significant large-scale changes in corporate reforms for SOEs.

Within such a corporatization and ownership diversification process, corporate managers in China were given 'broad authority to use and dispose of the property entrusted to them by the state for management and business purposes' (Broadman, 1995, p. 26-27). Government has changed its role from a manager to a supervisor, being responsible for guiding and requiring the business sector to transfer the traditional extensive development model to the modern model of intensive and sustainable growth. By decentralizing the management power to the corporate level, government macro control took place of originally direct intervention on corporate decision-makings. At the same time, with a relaxation of Party control over the economy, society and ultimately over public discourse, grassroots NGOs have been tolerated to survive in such a state-dominated society, which can help to fulfil some social responsibilities from the grassroots perspective that government cannot do well.

With economic development in China, ever more environmental issues, such as climate change, air pollution, water scarcity, forest degradation, soil and land deterioration, and biodiversity destruction, have been emerging in China. Towards a market-oriented economy with incorporating market mechanisms in the Chinese economic structure, environmental governance has been paid ever more attentions by the central state, and requirement of sustainable development for the Chinese business sector has been put on the agenda of the central state. The main feature of environmental governance in China should be keeping pace with the rapid development of national economy as well as the rapid expansion of population. In 1995, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 14th Central Committee of the CPC issued the 'Ninth Five-Year Plan for the National Economy and Social Development', specially strengthening the transition from the extensive economic growth model to the intensive growth model. The 1997's 15th National Congress of the CPC identified sustainable development strategy as one of the core strategies for the socialist modernisation, and strengthened the significance of protecting natural resources and environment (Li, 2008).

With emergence of environment as a global problem, the traditional centralised command-and-control model has no longer worked well because of multiple non-point source polluters (Evans, 2012). Thus, there has been a shift from government to governance in the development of environmental governance system, in which corporation and NGOs play more active roles to deal with environmental issues. Corporations, dominating each stage of the supply chain, are engaged directly in the process of resource depletion, energy reservation, and waste emission, and play a key role in environmental governance for negotiating and implementing environmental policies at the national and international level (Levy and Newell, 2005). After corporate reforms in the 1990s, both SOEs and private corporations in China

have been required to enhance their environmental performance and green competitiveness, not only reacting to regulatory pressure from the different levels of governments, but also responding to market pressure from investors and customers, as well as social pressure from NGOs and the public.

Since the early 1990s, grassroots green NGOs have emerged in China and gradually played an irreplaceable role in facilitating collective action and balancing power between government and business within the modern environmental governance system. As Gramsci (1971) points out, civil society stands between the state and the economic structure with its legislation and coercion. However, different from NGOs in the western countries, in the Chinese state-dominated society, any green grassroots candidate want to register as a legal green NGO, it is compulsory to find a government institution to be as its head of supervision. Then with its sponsor's approval, the departments of civil affair in local governments would decide if an applicant can be registered as a social organization in China. Under such a 'dual administration system', green NGOs need to strictly follow government regulations to carry out their activities and thus their potentials are hard to be realised to the largest extent. Spires (2011) proposes a model of 'contingent symbiosis' to describe the relationship between government and NGO in China, which are mutual exploitations and mutual suspicious. On the one hand, the Chinese governments have realised that NGOs can provide some social services from grassroots perspective that government cannot do well; on the other hand, the fear and suspicion that some NGOs' activities may challenge government policies and regulations, has resulted in the governments' strict controls on NGOs' movements. But in recent years, green NGOs, relying on the increasing influences of the mass media, have more opportunities to present their green opinions and fight against corporate polluted activities.

In short, with the transition from the planned economy to the market economy in China, sustainable development has been the main theme of the new era. The central state in China has relaxed the Party control on both the economic structure and the civil society, and government plays a role of supervisor. Under government's supervisions, corporation has turned focus to improve green performance to meet national requirements and international standards, while green NGO has also become a significant battleground for broader social and political conflicts in environmental governance.

3.3 Hegemony changing in recent years

In recent years, as mentioned above, with an ever more relaxation of party control over the business sector and the civil society in China, non-state actors, corporations and green NGOs, have played more active roles in China's modern environmental governance system. Especially during the past five years, with ever more stringent requirements of corporate environmental performance from the central state, local governments have extended their role to a 'supervisor and coordinator' to supervise corporate and NGOs' activities and promote tripartite cooperation among local governments, corporations and green NGOs, in order to balance the local economic growth and sustainable development as well as maintain social stability and development.

Due to the special historical and political roots in China, it has been always difficult for local governments to make decisions on choosing economic priority or environmental priority. Nowadays, national assessments of local governments' contributions are mainly determined by their 'achievements' in aspects of not only economic growth and social stability, but also sustainable development. Under the Chinese central government's ever more attentions to environmental governance and sustainable development, especially after the 'Scientific Development Concept' proposed in 2003, any further environmental damages caused by local business also directly impact the achievement assessment of local governments. Especially in recent years, with increasing green awareness of the public in China, environmental damages by local heavy industries would cause different levels of disturbances among the local residents. Public demonstrations or media reports against local environmental deteriorations are most unwillingly seen by local enterprises as well as local governments at the current

stage, not only directly influencing the appraisal of the local government achievements on the aspects of sustainable development and social stability, but also causing a huge amount of payoffs to the local residents, reacting to huge social pressure. Thus, at the current stage, with the central state attaching great importance to the sustainability issues in the process of the local economic development, both the economic growth and the environmental sustainability are the same important for local governments to improve their achievements.

With the change from highly prescriptive planning to macro control and supervision from the central state in China, supervision and cooperation between the local governments and the local corporations, as new ways of acting, measures a success for the local economic development. On the one hand, for obtaining higher evaluations from the central state, local governments have similar interest to local business with pursuit of profit maximisation. On the other hand, the local governments also need to monitor local corporate operations stringently, ensuring all the production and emission indicators to meet the national environmental protection standards. Such kind of supervision and cooperation mechanisms between local governments and local corporations in environmental governance can keep stable development of local economy.

In addition, due to increasing influences of green NGOs as well as its representative to the civil society in China, although green NGOs have still been under the 'dual-administration system' of the local governments, local governments gradually relaxed their supervision on NGOs' activities to some extent and sought for some degree of cooperation with green NGOs in China's environmental governance nowadays, in order to promote harmonious development among the state, the capital and the civil society. On the one hand, green NGOs in China can help local governments to monitor production pollutions and corporate emissions without any complex personal relations mixed, via more objective and frequent assessments on the local environmental situations. Local environment regulation departments, with NGO's assistance, have fewer concerns on the sudden appearance of the significantly environmental problems caused by delayed monitoring works or information distortion during reporting progressively within the complex governmental structures. On the other hand, green NGOs can help corporations to improve green images greatly in the public. With NGOs' positive assessments and reviews on environmental performance, corporations can greatly enhance their green competitions in the market, not only relieving environmental pressure and market pressure on them, but also enhancing brand recognition and public acceptance in the market. The positive reviews from NGOs on corporate performance can benefit not only corporations, but also achievements of local governments. Green NGO, with its grassroots nature, can carry out convincing assessments on the local environment and the local corporate green performance for both local governments and the whole public society.

In short, facing up to ever more stringent requirements of sustainable development from the central state, local governments have gradually sought for some degree of cooperation with local business and local NGOs, in order to create a win-win scenario, balancing economic growth and sustainable development as well as maintaining social harmony and stability.

4 CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates the theoretical evolution of conceptions of hegemony, which is then informed by Antonio Gramsci's theory, and then developed by Robert Cox, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to neo-Gramscian theoretical domains, and recently incorporated by David Levy to environmental governance. From theory to practice, based on a timeline, this paper discusses the changes of hegemony in the development of China's environment governance during the past six decades from a neo-Gramscian perspective.

In the first stage, from the 1950s to 1980s, China has experienced a long period of planned economy system, in which the whole society was under highly prescriptive central planning with the central guideline of extensive economic growth to maximize industrial outputs. Environmental problems had not been viewed by the state as a crisis of governance after the

establishment of the New China. Within an extensive growth model, the central government had not treated the serious environmental pollution as ‘a new threat to hegemony’ during that period. As a result, both the local government and the SOEs in China failed to be actively involved in the environmental governing activities, since there were no clear requirements in prescriptive plans from the central state during the period of the planned economy in China. Under the overpowering control and subsequent monitors, as well as restrictions of citizens’ activities in the Chinese governance (Heberer, 2012), especially during the period of the planned economy, there had been no NGO existing in such a social context. Thus, for NGOs, as the only legitimate mean to effect transformative change in China, its missing had led to the lack of activities of civil society in the Chinese planned economy.

In the second stage, from the 1978 Reform to several years ago, China has gradually transformed to a market-oriented economy and loosen Party control over the economy, society and ultimately over public discourse. With the transition of the central guideline for national development from extensive economic growth to intensive growth, sustainable development has become the main theme of development for the new era in China. Under the supervision of government, non-state actors in China including business and civil society have played more active roles in the modern governance. Corporations have been committed to improving their environmental performance and green competitiveness to meet the national and international standards in the global market, and green NGOs have started to be involved in the Chinese modern environmental governance system to balance the power relations between the state and the capital.

In recent ten years, after the ‘Scientific Development Concept’ proposed in 2003 by the Hu Jintao government, maintaining a balance between economic growth and sustainable development has been the new theme nowadays in China. With ever more stringent requirements of corporate environmental performance and sustainable development for local economy from the central state, local governments have extended their role to a ‘supervisor and coordinator’ to promote tripartite cooperation among local governments, corporations and green NGOs, in order to balance the local economic growth and sustainable development as well as maintaining social stability and development.

In conclusion, in the hegemonic discourses of the Chinese environmental governance system, government, with supreme power over the whole society in the Chinese governance system, stands at a primary position; corporation, directly influencing national economic growth of China, stands at a secondary position; and green NGO, relying on the increasing influences of the mass media, stands at an auxiliary position. However, with a gradual relaxation of Party control on the economic structure and even the public discourses, green NGOs’ activism has been regarded as a feasible way for balancing economic growth and sustainable development in today’s environmental governance in China, although power and influences of NGOs in the public green programs as well as the public environmental decision-makings have still been much weaker than the state and the business sector. At the current stage, NGOs in China have tried to employ different strategies and skills to carry out their green activities, so as to survive as a necessary ingredient within the Chinese environmental governance system.

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