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Collective Identity, Framing, and Mobilization of Environmental Protest in Urban China: A Case Study of Qidong's Protest

Abstract: Environmental concerns have become one of most important causes of “mass incidents” (quntixing shijian) together with illegal land acquisition and house demolition by local authorities and labor disputes in China. A number of large-scale environmental protests broke out and attracted widespread attention from home and abroad in the recent years. Through the fieldwork on a collective action occurred in 2012 in the City of Qidong, Jiangsu Province, against a proposed industrial waste water disposal project, this study explores the role of collective identity in the formation and mobilization of an environmental protest in contemporary China. It suggests that collective identity articulated in the protest is not just a static property of certain group of people based on history, culture and locality, it also works as a flexible framing strategy which can be pragmatically constructed or re-constructed by the discontents. It interacts with the specific political opportunities in the process of mobilization, so as to facilitate the recruitment of potential adherents, seek the sympathy of local elites, as well as limit the options which the authority can use to suppress the collective actions.

Introduction

The “mass incidents” associated with environmental reasons have increased rapidly

with an average annual growth rate of 29% since 1996 in China.¹ Currently, environmental concerns have become one of most important causes of “mass incidents” together with illegal land acquisition and house demolition by local authorities and labor disputes. In recent years, a number of large-scale environmental popular protests broke out in a row in urban areas of China, such as Xiamen citizens’ protest against a planned paraxylene (PX) plant in 2007, Dalian citizens’ protest against the PX in 2011, Shifang’s protest against a copper-refinery factory in 2012, Qidong’s protest against a proposed industrial waste water disposal project, etc. In 1 June 2007, due to the fear of risks to the local people’s health and environment, about 10,000 citizens in Xiamen City, Fujian Province took to the street to protest against the proposed siting of a PX factory in Ximmen which is the first typical environmental protest occurred in urban areas attracting attention from home and abroad in the new millennium.² Following Xiamen citizens’ struggle against the proposed siting of PX project, a wave of popular protests raised by the environmental concerns occurred in urban areas of China. The participants in each

¹ Ru Xin, Lu Xueyi and Li Peilin, eds., *2010 nian: Zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* (Analysis and Forecast on China’s Social Development (2010)) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe), p. 8.

² Thomas Johnson, “Environmentalism and NIMBYism in China: Promoting a Rules-based Approach to Public Participation”, *Environmental Politics* 19, no. 3 (2010): 430-48; Huang Ronggui and Ngai-ming Yip, “Internet and Activism in Urban China: A Case Study of Protests in Xiamen and Panyu”, *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 11, no. 2 (2012): 201-23; Charles Tilly and Lesley J. Wood, *Social Movements, 1768-2012* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

of those protests all claimed that the proposed industrial projects would seriously endanger the local environment and the health of local people and called for the local people to unite to fight against the construction of proposed facilities in the locality so as to protect their homelands. One of the most notable characteristics of this wave of environmental protests might be the strong local collective identities embedded in those collective actions. During the course of those struggles, the local collective identities and collective memory have become the crucial symbolic resources to legitimate the claims of the protesters to oppose the proposed siting of the facilities with negative externalities in their hometowns. That might partially explain the reasons why the existing literature tend to interpreted this wave of environmental protests as self-interested NIMBY (not in my backyard) behavior which refers to the local residents' intense opposition to the proposed facilities with adverse impacts which are in or close to their residential communities.³ While the existing literature of China studies has documented that the collective identity is critical to the development of collective movements,⁴ at this moment it still lacks

³ Johnson, "Environmentalism and NIMBYism in China: promoting a rules-based approach to public participation"; Huang and Yip, "Internet and Activism in Urban China: A Case Study of Protests in Xiamen and Panyu"; Deng Yanhua and Yang Guobing, "Pollution and Protest in China: Environmental Mobilization in Context", *The China Quarterly* 214 (2013): 321-36.

⁴ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Yang, Guobing, "Achieving Emotions in Collective Actions: Emotional Process and Movement Mobilization in the 1989 Chinese Student Movement",

of relevant studies exploring the process by which the collective identities are framed in environmental protests. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how the interests are related by the activists to construction of the collective identities in the collective actions against the proposed project with externalities? How the discontents unearth the collective memories preexisted in the communities to construct the collective movements' identity? And how the construction of collective identity interacts with the political opportunity so as to sustain the collective movements?

Collective Identity, Framing, and the Collective Actions

According to Polletta Francesca and James M. Jasper, the collective identity refers to “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution”.⁵ A number of studies focused on collective actions have documented the importance of the collective identities to the emergence and mobilization process of collective actions.⁶ According to the

The Sociological Quarterly 41, no. 4 (2000): 593-614; Ching Kwan Lee, “The ‘Revenge of History’ Collective Memories and Labor Protests in Northeastern China”, *Ethnography* 1, no. 2 (2000): 217-37; Chan Chris King-Chi and Pun Ngai, “The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China”, *The China Quarterly* 198 (2009): 287-303.

⁵ Polletta Francesca and James M. Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements”, *Annual Review of Sociology* (2001): 283-305.

⁶ Della D. Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Kelly Caroline and Sara Breinlinger, “Identity and Injustice: Exploring Women's Participation in Collective Action”, *Journal of Community & Applied Social*

theory of collective action by Olson Mancur, one of the most crucial problems that the successful collective actions must overcome is the “free-riding” problem.⁷

While the beneficial outcomes of collective actions (e.g., the success of the democratic movements) will be unexclusively shared by a general public, the cost of the collective actions will concentrate on those participants. As a result, the rational self-interested individuals are not willing to participate in the collective movements pursuing the common-goods. Therefore, as suggested by Craig J. Jenkins, the major method to overcome the problem of free-riding is to “offer the collective incentives of group solidarity and commitment to moral purpose” in that way the collective interests will be fused with personal interests.⁸ In this sense, the potential of a group of people to act together is largely dependent on the degree of the strength of collective solidarity and collective identities that preexisted within the communities. It seems that the collective actions are more likely to take place in the communities within which the people share stronger collective identities.

Elizabeth Perry suggested that the local identities played a critical role in the development of China’s traditional peasant rebellions as well as the labour protests

Psychology 5, no. 1 (1995): 41-57; Melucci Alberto, “The Process of Collective Identity”, *Social Movements and Culture* 4 (1995): 41-63; Melucci Alberto, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Polletta and Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements”.

⁷ Olson Mancur, *The Logic of Collective Action* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 166.

⁸ Craig J. Jenkins, “Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements”, *Annual Review of Sociology* (1983):537.

in Shanghai during the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ Chan and Pun's study on the labour protests by the migrant workers in Pearl River Delta after reform and opening-up suggested that the preexisted collective identities based on "locality, ethnicity, gender and peer alliance" provided the migrant workers with useful potential organizing resources to initiate the protests in the first place.¹⁰

However, the preexisting collective identities should not necessarily be a precondition for the emergence of collective action. In fact, the collective identities also can be created or invented by the movement entrepreneurs working as a strategy in the process of mobilization.¹¹ As argued by Porta and Diani, in the course of collective action, the collective identity is not an "autonomous object", rather, a dynamic and fluid "social process" by which the individuals' feeling of belonging to certain broader group has been "either reinforced or weakened".¹² Poletta and Jasper argue that the formation of collective identity "involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests,

⁹ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor*.

¹⁰ Chan and Pun, "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China".

¹¹ Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*; Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements"; Steven Pfaff, "Collective Identity and Informal Groups in Revolutionary Mobilization: East Germany in 1989", *Social Forces* 75, no. 1 (1996): 91-117;

¹² Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, p. 85, 87.

and boundaries”.¹³ In other words, while the preexisting bonds, interests, boundaries as well as the sense of belonging may provide the “raw materials” for formation of collective identity, they also need to be rediscovered, rearticulated and constructed tactically to enhance the collective identity to sustain the development of collective actions. In this sense, the formation of collective identities involves the act of collective action framing which refers to:

*[M]ovement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change.*¹⁴

Moreover, as Benford and Snow argue, the collective action framing is strategic processes by which they refer to “framing processes that are deliberative, utilitarian, and goal directed: Frames are developed and deployed to achieve a specific purpose”,¹⁵ such as to encourage movement participation, seek sympathy from the elite and so forth. As a strategy, through framing of collective identity, the activists of collective movements should be able to clearly (a) identify the unjust situation which the potential adherents are experiencing; (b) define the boundaries

¹³ Polletta and Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements”, p. 298.

¹⁴ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 615.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.624.

between the “we” who are characterized by the common traits and share common interests and the antagonistic group of people who should be blamed for the injustice that the audience is suffering; and (c) offer a possible effective solution to the audience of collective actions.¹⁶ What should be borne in mind is that the collective actions are not unlikely to take place without a collective identity. James M. Jasper and Jane D. Poulsen have shown that the collective movements still can attract the participants even in the situation that there is no ascribed identities and networks.¹⁷ However, through the successful framing of collective identity by the activists, the potential adherents might be more efficiently recruited to participate in collective actions. Therefore, the way how the collective identity is framed will affect the efficiency of potential participants’ recruitment. Francesca Polletta shows how the “narratives” told by many tellers in the public settings help to constitute “students activist” as a new collective identity and to make high-risk activism

¹⁶ Kevin J. O’Brien and Rachel Stern. 2008. “Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China”, in *Popular Protest in China*, eds. Kevin J. O’Brien (California: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 11-25; Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*; Polletta and Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements”; Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, “Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization”, in *Waves of Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties*, eds. Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 349-65.

¹⁷ James M. Jasper and Jane D. Poulsen, “Recruiting Strangers and Friends: Moral Shocks and Social Networks in Animal Rights and Anti-nuclear Protests”, *Social Problems* 42 (1995): 493.

attractive.¹⁸

Moreover, in order to promote the development of collective actions, the activists not only need to make efforts to efficiently attract the participants but also should make a series of other strategic decisions to legitimize their claims and gain the sympathy of the elites as well as minimize the risks that the collective actions are repressed by the authorities. The existing literature has investigated the role of the collective identity in the activists' "strategic and tactical decision making".¹⁹ According to the new social movement approach, the movement actors tend to choose specific tactics (e.g., non-violent civic obedience) which will highlight the collective identities of participants. Moreover, as stated earlier, the collective identity is not immutable. Rather, it can be rediscovered, constructed, deconstructed, as well as created by the activists according to the need of mobilization of collective movements.²⁰ Since the collective identities can be manipulated according to the goal of the collective action, how the activists construct the collective actions will to some extent affect the outcome of collective movements. For instance, in the United States, as the charges of lesbianism by the public have often been used to discredit the traditional feminists who challenge the

¹⁸ Francesca Polletta, "'It Was Like A Fever...': Narrative and Identity in Social Protest", *Social Problems* (1998): 137.

¹⁹ Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements", p. 285.

²⁰ Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An introduction*, pp. 93-5; Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements", p.294.

patriarchal structures and values, the feminist movement community consciously avoided to be grouped together with the lesbians.²¹ Pfaff documented the critical role of the construction of collective identity in East Germany's revolutionary mobilization in 1989. "[T]he construction of an oppositional identity by the protesters through the use of the concept of *das Volk* ('the people')" not only helped to recruit diverse actors into the mass demonstration but also was an effort to defeat the authoritarian regime's attempt to defame the popular movement as being "antisocialist".²² In short, the construction of collective identity is critical to legitimize the challengers' claims so as to reduce the risks of repression by the antagonist groups.

Research Methods and Data Collection

This study focuses on the protest against an industrial waste water disposal project in Qidong, Jiangsu province. Between 2012 and 2014, the author conducted ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews in Qidong. On 28 July 2012, the author participated the demonstration against the project occurred in the downtown of Qidong. Later on, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty informants, including the activists who played key role in the mobilization of

²¹ Taylor and Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization".

²² Pfaff, "Collective identity and informal groups in revolutionary mobilization: East Germany in 1989", p. 102, 107.

protests, participants of the demonstration, ordinary citizens, as well as local officials. Due to the sensitivity of the topic in China, the interviewees were selected in a snowball fashion. Besides the participant observation and interviews, the author also collected a large number of archives, including activists' blogs, petition letters written by the activists, leaflets and posters, proposals submitted to local People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Committee, official statements as well as newspaper reports, to reconstruct the process of how the collective identity was framed by the discontents to push forward the collective movements against the polluter.

Qidong Peoples' Opposition to the Industrial Waste Water Disposal Project

The planned industrial waste pipeline was originally designed for Oji Paper which is a large multinational paper corporation of Japan. In September, 2004, it was announced that the Oji Paper decided to construct a new paper factory in Nantong city which is located in the middle of Jiangsu province. Originally, in order to attract Oji's investment in Nantong, the Nantong municipal government offered a proposal to construct the "Nantong project of discharging the waste water reaching the standard into the sea" (*nantong dabiao weishui paihai gongcheng*) to facilitate the emission of 180,000 tons of waste water per day from Oji Paper. According to the proposal, this project was also aimed to collect the industrial waste water

reaching the discharging standard from the industrial production in Nantong, Haimen and Qidong into a long pipeline to transport it to the China Yellow Sea, and the discharge port was chosen to be sited in sea area 6 kilometers northeast of Tanglu Harbor along the coastline of Qidong. The maximize volume that the proposed pipeline was designed to transport was up to 600,000 tons per day.

In the first place, the proposed project by the Nantong municipal government met strong opposition from some deputy members of Qidong Municipal People's Congress. During the fourteenth session of Qidong Municipal People's Congress in 2005, Zhou Zhixin together with twenty other deputies jointly submitted “A motion about Nantong project of discharging the waste water reaching the standard into the sea” to the Qidong Municipal People’s Congress, and Gu Bangxiang together with nineteen other deputies submitted “A motion about resolutely opposing the Japan’s Oji Paper discharging the waste water into the sea”. Both motions stated the deputies’ concerns on the risks and legality of the proposed project. According to the Article 30 of “People’s Republic of China’s Marine Environmental Protection Law”, it is not allowed to build new outfalls in the marine nature reserve, important fishery waters, coastal scenic spots and other marine areas that need special protection. However, according to the “People’s Republic of China’s marine fisheries waters map (the first batch)” issued by China's Ministry of Agriculture in February, 2002, the proposed siting of the outfall of industrial waste water disposal

project, coastal waters along the Tanglu Harbor in Qidong, is the important fishery waters which need to be protected. The deputy members of both motions held that the proposed industrial waste water disposal project would cause serious pollution to Qidong's marine environment and have a serious impact on Qidong's marine fisheries economy which has been a pillar industry of Qidong as well as local people's health. Nonetheless, the opposition from the local deputy members of Qidong Municipal People's Congress didn't effectively prevent this project from being proceeded. From 2008 to 2009, this proposed project and its Environmental Impacts Assessment report had been consecutively approved by Jiangsu Provincial Environmental Protection Office of Jiangsu Provincial Oceanic and Fishery Bureau as well as Jiangsu Provincial Development and Reform Commission.

In addition to the opposition from within the institution, civil society opposition to this project was also slowly developing. Since 2007, some local netizens in Qidong began to post on a local online forum, "Qiwu Dongjiang", to voice their opposition to the proposed project, which, however, did not attract much attention. It was not until the mid of 2009 that the posts protesting against the proposed project on the forum aroused widespread response. At the same time, the protest had spilled over from the online to offline. After getting connection through online communities such as QQ groups which is most popular instant chat software, a number of local activists began to carry out a series of mobilization activities

such as distributing leaflets, green bags with slogans, and collecting signatures to call for opposition to the proposed project in the downtown as well as along the coastal areas in Qidong. Moreover, local activists also voiced their concerns about the risks of the planned project to Qidong's marine environment and local people's health through petition to the governments and media as well as by starting a case with the Nanjing Intermediate People's Court and Jiangsu Provincial High Court. It seems that local citizens' collective actions were successful in suspending the construction of the proposed project. It is revealed by the processing report on the proposed project submitted by Nantong municipal government to Nanjing municipal government in May, 2011 that due to Qidong citizens' intensive opposition to the project since its' commencement in March, 2009, the construction of pipeline through Haimen and Qidong could not be proceeded smoothly.²³ Eventually, the construction of pipeline was suspended in Haimen.

However, in the late May 2012, the local activists were informed that the pipeline project would be re-started soon, so they decided to resume their collective actions which had come to a halt. On 18 June, the officials from the Nantong government went to Qidong to have dialogue with local citizens including the activists, deputy members of Qidong's Municipal People's Congress, fishermen, as well as the retired cadres of Qidong, but no consensus could be reached by all the

²³ <http://www.cb.com.cn/deep/2012_0804/403286.html> [22 Dec. 2013].

parties. At the same time, the mass mobilization increasingly escalated in Qidong, the activists carried out intensive mobilization to call for the public to oppose the proposed project in urban parks, residential areas, as well as coastal towns and villages. On 6 July, two activists submitted an application for the demonstration on 28, 29 and 30 July to the local authority. Although the application was rejected by the officials, the activists decided to go on with it and the information of demonstration was spread quickly over the city through the Internet and offline mobilization.

On the morning of 28 July, although the local government had made a lot of efforts to prevent the citizens taking to the streets with public force measures including halting the public transport, issuing the public letter to citizens, as well as deploying large numbers of police along the proposed demonstration route, the protest still broke out. While one parade proceeded along the planned route, another one did not follow that route and directly rushed into the city government. Shortly, tens of thousands of citizens occupied the government compound. Around noon, the Nantong government announced that the proposal of industrial waste-water pipeline was scrapped.

The Collective Identity and Qidong Citizens' Collective Protest

In the previous section of this paper, it was elaborated that the collective identity is

critical to the development of collective actions. However, the collective identity does not necessarily lead to the collective action as it needs to be properly framed by the movement actors. In Qidong's case, the local activists' efforts on frames of a collective identity among the citizens of Qidong area was had been an essential component of mobilization. While there are social movement organizations which are run by the professional activists to do the mobilization in democratized countries,²⁴ in an antiauthoritarian state like China where spontaneous civil associations or organizations are yet tightly controlled, what brings the people together to make claims to the authority is an interesting question faced by the scholars of China's collective action. A number of scholars attached great importance on the protest leaders in the course of mobilization of collective actions.²⁵ Cai notes that in most cases, workers' mobilization in China would be possible only with the presence of organizers. He argues that the worker leaders are "especially important" for the collective action in terms of disseminating information, inspiring "confidence among participants", and articulating their demands.²⁶ Chen also suggests that the worker leaders played "a critical role in

²⁴ O'Brien and Stern, "Introduction: Studying Contention in Contemporary China", p. 17.

²⁵ Cai Yongshun, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period", *The China Quarterly* 170 (2002): 327-344; Chen Feng, "Worker Leaders and Framing Factory-Based Resistance", pp. 88-107; Li Lianjian and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China", *The China Quarterly* 193(2008): 1-23.

²⁶ Cai, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period", pp. 332-33.

framing contention and choosing tactics from the repertoire of contention”.²⁷ In the course of mobilization of Qidong protest, through the local activists’ efforts of framing, the collective identities of “Qidong people” (*Qidong ren*) vs. “Nantong people” (*Nantong ren*) as well as Chinese vs. Japanese had been constructed as important “symbolic” resources²⁸ to mobilize the movement participation across the locality as well as legitimize their claims against the planned pipeline in Qidong. To explain exactly what the role of collective identity in prompting the Qidong’s protests, I will examine how the collective identities are strategically framed by the movement activists in this protest. To this end, I will analyze (a) how the collective identity was framed to facilitate the movement participation; (b) how the activists strategically constructed the collective identity to seek the sympathy of local elites, as well as limit the options which the authority can use to suppress the collective actions.

The Collective Identity and Recruitment of Potential

Adherents

As stated earlier, for the frames of collective identities, it is critical for the movement entrepreneur to be able to clearly define the boundaries between the “we” who are characterized by the common traits and shared interests and the

²⁷ Chen, “Worker Leaders and Framing Factory-Based Resistance”, p. 89.

²⁸ Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, p. 21.

antagonistic group of people who should be blamed for the injustice that the audience is suffering. In the process of mobilization, firstly, the activists highlighted the adverse effects of the planned industrial waste water disposal project on Qidong's marine environment and fisheries as well as local people's health which was the unjust condition facing the Qidong people; secondly, the activists held the Nantong government and the Japan's Oji Paper account for the injustice which defined the boundary between the challenge group – the Qidong people and the antagonistic group – the Nantong government and the Japan's Oji Paper. Thirdly, they called for the Qidong people to protest against the planned pipeline. I now turn to these efforts of the activists.

Through successful framing, the activists should first be able to offer a compelling injustice condition for the potential participants. In the Qidong's case, the local activists made great efforts to present a picture to the public that the proposed industrial waste water disposal project would cause serious adverse impacts on Qidong's marine environment, fisheries, as well as local peoples' health throughout the mobilization process. In a leaflet, the activists depicted the serious damage caused by the industrial waste water discharged into the sea on the Qidong's fishery as follows:

Qidong is a big fishery city, the Lvsi fishing port is world famous. If Oji Paper discharges the waste water into Qidong, it will produce the

following serious consequences: Qidong marine fisheries and aquaculture will be hit severely and even disappear. Because large amounts of industrial water were discharged into the sea, it will cause changes in temperature, potential of hydrogen (pH), and brought along with many toxic and hazardous substances that would seriously affect the habitat of fishes, resulting in some species extinction, fish migration. The rest of the small portion of the fish will result in accumulation of toxic and hazardous substances affecting humans consumption (if people eat such aquatic products, the body will be poisoned, and even carcinogenic).²⁹

In addition to the damages to Qidong's fishery, the activists highlighted the adverse impacts of the project on the local peoples' health:

The major emission of the Oji Paper is Dioxins, one of the most powerful carcinogens, which is by far the most toxic compound. Its toxicity is 130 times of sodium, 900 times of arsenic, mainly containing teratogenic, carcinogenic, mutagenic benzene homologues, which will easily lead to all kinds of strange illnesses, such as children with cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and pregnant women will give birth to a large number of

²⁹ It is cited from a mobilization flyer in Qidong.

*abnormal children.*³⁰

The frames of the damaging effects of the project are attractive to the local people. According to the plan of Nantong government, the planned pipeline was originally designed for the Oji Paper to discharge the waste water into coastal areas of Qidong. Qidong, a county-level city under the jurisdiction of Nantong city in southeast of Jiangsu province, is located in the intersection of East China Sea, Yellow Sea, and the Yangtze River, and has 203 kilometers of coastline and 660,000 acres of beach area which provide unique natural and geographical conditions to develop the marine fisheries. Lvsi fishing ground in Qidong is one of China's four major fishing grounds and the annual catch of seafood accounts for 1/3 of Jiangsu's total output of seafood.³¹ Among the population of more than 1.1 million in Qidong, there are nearly 200,000 citizens directly dependent on the fishing industry for a living. On the government website of Qidong, Qidong claims itself as China's famous "hometown of marine economy".³² For a long time, seafood has been conceived as a specialty of Qidong by the local people. With the development of tourism in Qidong in recent years, seafood has even been processed into tourist souvenirs to sell in the market. In this sense, the marine environment and fisheries are rather significant to the local people not only in

³⁰ It is cited from a mobilization flyer in Qidong.

³¹ <http://www.qdtj.gov.cn/index_detail.asp?LB=2&id=2316 > [24 Dec.2013].

³² <<http://www.qidong.gov.cn/col/col1221/index.html> > [24 Dec. 2013].

terms of economic needs, but also symbolic. Meanwhile, it has been documented that the Chinese citizens are increasingly concerned about the health risks of environmental pollution.³³ Therefore, through the intensive frames of damaging effects of the proposed project on the marine environment and local people's health, the activist successfully presented a picture to the Qidong's citizens that the interests of their hometown and themselves would be treaded on by the planned project.

After identifying the damaging effects of the planned project on Qidong, the local activists distinguished the antagonistic group of people who should be blamed for causing those sufferings from "us". One of the major antagonists identified by the activists in Qidong's protest is Nantong municipal government. In a leaflet printed in July 2012, the activists accused the Nantong government for discharging the industrial waste water into Qidong's coastal area:

How to explain the condition while the benefits of Oji Paper Project are harvested by Nantong, the waste water of the paper making was discharged into Qidong and Qidong people have to bear the serious consequences due to the pollution? The Oji Paper had wanted to settle down in Shanghai, Zhejiang and Nanjing, but it was rejected by the local

³³ Yang Guobin, "Brokering Environment and Health in China: Issue Entrepreneurs of the Public Sphere", *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 63 (2010): 101-18.

*governments. However, when it came to Nantong, the Nantong government accepted it for the sake of GDP growth of Nantong City, yet 150,000 tons of industrial waste water per day were discharged into Qidong. Respected Nantong principal leaders, if your parents and children were living in Qidong, will you do the same?*³⁴

In another leaflet, the activists drew the boundary between “Qidong people” and “Nantong people” as follows:

*The smart people in Nantong city want cleanness, so they send the waste water to our Qidong’s sea.The people in Nantong city drink the wine offered by Japanese, get the benefits from the Japanese, but let us Qidong people poisoned by the pollution, where is there such thing in this world!*³⁵

Although it might be unconscious for the local activists, they drew on the idea of environmental justice to frame the unjust conditions facing the Qidong’s citizens as a whole. According to the definition of environmental justice by United States Environmental Protection Agency, environmental justice refers to “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and

³⁴ It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

³⁵ It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”.³⁶ However, the benefits and risks of the planned industrial waste water disposal project were notably disproportionately distributed among Nantong and Qidong. As Japan’s largest industrial project in both China and overseas with a total investment of \$ 2.7 billion, the Oji Paper was expected to achieve annual sales income of 6.5 billion yuan and the total annual tax revenues would exceed 700 million yuan.³⁷ One the one hand, Nantong was poised to greatly benefit from the Oji Paper’s massive investment in Nantong. On the other hand, the waste water generated in the process of paper making would have been discharged into Qidong, polluting the local marine environment and doing harm to local people’s health. This emotional frame of unjust condition by the local activists to large extent ignited the public grievances in Qidong to the planned pipeline and significantly aggravated the preexisted identity conflict between Qidong people and Nantong people which to large extent consolidated the internal solidarity within the citizens in Qidong.

According to China’s administrative division, Qidong is county-level city under the jurisdiction of the prefecture-level Nantong city. China's current administrative division management system could be roughly divided into five

³⁶ <<http://www.epa.gov/region1/ej/>> [26 Dec. 2013].

³⁷ Wang Tong, “Ribei wangzi zhizhi Jiangsu Nantong gongchang kaigong” (Japan's Oji Paper Nantong factory started), *Zhongguo zhiye* (China Pulp & Paper Industry) 28, no. 12 (2007): 79.

levels from top to low: Beijing central government, provinces and autonomous regions, prefecture-level cities, counties, and townships. The government of higher level of administrative area has the jurisdictions over the lower level of administrative area. Therefore, in theory, Qidong people also could be identified as Nantong people. However, prior to the mobilization of the protest, there already existed a divide between the Qidong people and Nantong people in terms of identity. The citizens in Qidong either prefer to identify themselves as Qidong people rather than Nantong people or simply do not consider themselves as Nantong people. This preexisting identity is closely related to history, geography, culture and etc.

From a historical and geographic perspective, Qidong is a land which has been deposited by the sediment for the Yangtze River over thousands of years. Due to the different times that the land was formed, today's Qidong once was separately governed by three counties. The south region of today's Qidong is the newest land deposited by sand with only a hundred and twenty years of history, known as the "outer sand" (*wai sha*), which was under the rule of Chongming County, Shanghai before 1928 when the Qidong county was set up. The central region, known as "lower sand" (*xia sha*), was under the rule of Haimen, Jiangsu province before 1941. The northern area with more than a thousand years of history, known as "north sand" (*bei sha*), was under the jurisdiction of Haimen in the Song, Yuan,

Ming and Qing dynasties, and then was governed by Nantong from 1912 to 1942. In March 1928, the south region, part of central region and north region were merged to set up the former Qidong county. After the founding of People's Republic of China, part of east Haimen and part of east Nantong were merged into the former Qidong county to form the Qidong that we see today. In line with the complex of composition of territory of Qidong, the origins of Qidong's residents are hard to trace. In the south region, the earliest inhabitants were mainly migrants from Chongming county, Shanghai and north Zhejiang; the earliest residents in the north region also were migrants whose origins, however, are impossible to find out. Meanwhile, the unique history, geography, and origins of residents of Qidong have also shaped different local culture from Nantong.³⁸ For instance, the dialects of Qidong and Nantong are so different that the people from these two places cannot communicate in their own dialect with each other.

It is due to this a series of social factors such as the unique history, geographical environment, origins of the residents as well as the dialects that bred the strong collective identity of so called "Qidong people" vs. "Nantong people". Once the external risks emerge, the strong collective identity could be transformed by the frames of movement activists into willingness to participate in collective

³⁸ Qidong County Annals Editorial Committee, 1993, *Qidong xianzhi* (Qidong County Annals) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993).

action against the outsiders. An activist explained how the local collective identity affects the public's attitudes to the proposed project:

*We Qidong people had ever no affection for Nantong, no sense of belonging to Nantong, now the factory is built in Nantong, but the waste water is going to be discharged into Qidong, the people feel particularly unfair.*³⁹

However, as argued by Porta and Diani, the collective identity is not a static property, but rather a fluid process of social construction.⁴⁰ They noted that “the collective identity is open to constant redefinition”⁴¹ which means that different boundaries will produce different collective identities. In Qidong's case, by identifying different antagonist groups, the activists defined different collective identities in the framing process. In addition to the Nantong government, the Japanese enterprise – Oji Paper was another un-ignorable “opponent” defined by the movement entrepreneurs. In a leaflet titled “Dear one million compatriots, action!”, the local activists spearhead fight on Japan:

Seventy years ago, the Japanese devils with guns opened our state gate, enslaved my people; today, they produce the pollution, destroying our homes, poisoning our children. Seventy years ago, our ancestors took up

³⁹ Interview, Qidong, 9 Feb. 2014.

⁴⁰ Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, p. 100.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 86.

*arms, desperately resisting becoming the conquered people. Today, in order to protect our beautiful home from being contaminated, in order not to be reviled by future generations, let's take action, voice our anger, resolutely resist, force the waste water from the Oji Paper out of the country with action, let them go back to Japan.*⁴²

Taking advantage of the preexisted anti-Japanese sentiment in Chinese society, the activists strategically framed the protest against the proposed siting of the pipeline as Chinese against Japanese. The anti-Japanese nationalism has a long history in China which could be traced to the early 20th century at a time when the Japanese increasingly intensified the invasion of China. Chalmers A. Johnson has documented that in wartime of 1930s, the anti-Japanese feeling played a decisive role in China's peasants' mobilization against the Japan's invasion and occupation in China.⁴³ After the founding of People's Republic of China, nationalism including anti-Japanese nationalism has functioned as an important component of the state's history propaganda package which has been "implanted in the national collective memory".⁴⁴ It has been noted that nationalism, in particular

⁴² It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

⁴³ Chalmers A. Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Stanford University Press, 1962).

⁴⁴ He Yanan, "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict", *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (2007): 1.

anti-Japanese feeling, is rising high in today's China.⁴⁵ The mobilization process of Qidong's protests also, to some extent, benefited from the popular sentiment against Japan diffused in Chinese society. Through reiterating the history of Japan's invasion and occupation of China in the 1930s and claiming the Japan's intention of producing pollution in China, the activists could wake the collective memories of anti-Japanese of potential movement adherents that would consolidate their collective identity as Chinese so as to fight collectively against the planned pipeline.

We have seen that in order to mobilize the potential adherents into the collective actions against the proposed siting of industrial waste water disposal pipeline, the local activists made efforts to frame the collective identities – Qidong people against the Nantong government and Chinese against Japanese, which was critical to enhance the internal solidarity within the local citizens and prompt their willing to act in the name of collective. In an interview with a participant of the protest, the interviewee explained why she would decide to stand up to oppose the proposed project in the first place as follows:

It is because of this sense of pride of my hometown that I am so angry,

⁴⁵ He Yanan, "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict", *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (2007): 1-24; Zhao Suisheng, "A state-led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 31, no. 3 (1998): 287-302; Zhao Suisheng, *A Nation-state by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

*this is the land where our children and grandchildren will be living, why let others trample on our hometown, just for the so-called economic development? But the risks will last for our children and grandchildren.*⁴⁶

An activist described the reaction of the public when they learned about the information of the proposed project in the course of mobilization as follows:

*When the people heard that the waste water is discharged from a Japanese company, and the factory is built in Nantong, but the waste water is discharged into Qidong, they all immediately got very angry. They highly appreciated what we did, and even donated money to our mobilization activists.*⁴⁷

However, as a strategy, the framing of collective identity is not only related to efficiency of mobilizing the potential participants but also to chance of survival of collective movements. In next part, I will elaborate how the activists' framing of collective identity is related to the political context in which the mass mobilization proceeds.

The Collective Identity and the Political Context

As Benford and Snow suggest, the collective action frames are not “static, reified entities but are continuously being constituted, contested, reproduced, transformed,

⁴⁶ Interview, Qidong, 17 Jan. 2014.

⁴⁷ Interview, Qidong, 9 Feb. 2014.

and/or replaced during the course of social movement activity”.⁴⁸ During the mobilization process of Qidong protest, the activists also did not stick to the frames of one single collective identity to the audience rather than shifting between two different collective identities – Qidong people vs. Nantong people and Chinese and Japanese. It in fact confirms the finding of students of social psychology that the collective identity, “refers to ‘us’ versus ‘them’ categorizations”⁴⁹, is highly variable, which entails the collective identity has been ever changing. Accordingly, the framing of collective identities is also a dynamic, ongoing process that is affected or constrained by a number of elements of social context in which it is embedded. In face of certain number of factors of the social context, it is necessary for the collective actions activists to strategically decide to how to frame the collective identity. In this sense, the collective identity in the collective movements should not be just considered as an ascribe property of certain group of people rather a strategy, that is, the framing processes of collective identities are “deliberative, utilitarian, and goal directed”⁵⁰: collective identities are constructed to achieve a specific purpose – to mobilize adherents, to seek the sympathy of local elites, as well as make their claims unimpeachable so as to limit the options which

⁴⁸ Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, p. 628.

⁴⁹ Rina S. Onorato and John C. Turner, “Fluidity in the Self - concept: The Shift from Personal to Social Identity”, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2004): 259.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 624.

the authority can use to suppress the collective actions and so on and so forth. In the large number of social movement literature, the political opportunity has the best capacity to conceptualize the external factors of social context which the activists can explore to strategically do the framing⁵¹.

Substantial China studies literature credits the rise of collective action to the emergence of political opportunity in the political system.⁵² For example, as observed by O'Brien, the surge of popular contention in the reform era of rural China "is in large part a product of political relaxation".⁵³ For one thing, the authority becomes more tolerant of certain types of collective actions such as small-scale interest-based action; for another thing, the rift within the political

⁵¹ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Holly J. McCammon, Harmony D. Newman, Courtney Sanders Muse and Teresa M. Terrell, "Movement framing and discursive opportunity structures: The political successes of the US women's jury movements", *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 5 (2007): 725-749; David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Movements, countermovements, and the structure of political opportunity", *American Journal of Sociology* (1996): 1628-1660.

⁵² Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Collective Action in the Chinese Countryside", *The China Journal* 48 (2002): 139-54; Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Rural China", *The China Quarterly* 143 (Sept. 1995): 756-83; Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China", *The China Journal* 51 (2004): 76-96; Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Xie Lei and Hein-Anton Van Der Heijden, "Environmental Movements and Political Opportunities: the Case of China", *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 51-68;

⁵³ O'Brien, "Collective Action in the Chinese Countryside", p. 151.

system itself has increased the likelihood of success of collective action. Although the Chinese state looks like a monolithic bloc from the outside, there are a lot of differences and even conflicts among different state agencies. For instance, different government departments have different interests and functions which entail that they might have different agenda on certain issues. It is also widely noted that there is gap between the central and local governments. For example, the central government tends to be more concerned about the legitimacy of the regime than the local governments.⁵⁴ However, the political opportunity does not necessarily lead to the success of collective action which is also in large part related to the activists' ability to discover and make use of the opportunity. In Qidong's protest, it has been seen that the political opportunity was taken advantage of by the activists to tactically frame the collective identity to promote the development of the protest.

It is especially notable that there had been deep divide on the construction of the planned pipeline within the governments.⁵⁵ The earliest opposition was from within Qidong government. During the Qidong Municipal People's Congress and Qidong Municipal People's Political Consultative Conference meetings in 2005, nearly forty local representatives submitted two motions to oppose the proposed

⁵⁴ Cai, *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*.

⁵⁵ "Wushui paixiang hefang? Qidong qishilu" (Where is the Industrial Waste Water Discharged to?), *Zhongguo jingying bao* (China Business News), 4 Aug. 2012.

project. Theoretically, the People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference have always been considered a "rubber stamp" since the National People's Congress has never rejected the proposal of the government since the founding of PRC. Nonetheless, as argued by Li et al., with more entrepreneurs entering into the politics such as PC and CPPCC, some fundamental changes will be added to China's political ecology.⁵⁶ In Qidong's case, the one who took the lead in the motion against the proposed project in the Qidong Municipal People's Congress is the manager of a local coastal aquaculture company. It is very likely that the revenue of his company will be affected by the pollution caused by the construction of industrial waste water disposal pipeline. Therefore, it is reasonable for him to oppose the project proposed by the Nantong government. Based on the similar consideration, the grassroots officials in the coastal towns also took the stance against the project.

Apart from members of municipal People's Congress and People's Political Consultative Conference as well as the grassroots officials, a number of retired veteran cadres of Qidong government also opposed the project. They submitted a proposal to the Municipal People's Political Consultative Conference in the name of old member association. They claimed that:

⁵⁶ Li Hongbin, Meng Lingsheng and Zhang Junsen, "Why do Entrepreneurs Enter Politics? Evidence from China", *Economic Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2006): 559-78.

The industrial waste water disposal pipeline of Nantong Oji Paper will go across Nantong Development Zone, Tongzhou District, Haimen, Qidong and reach the South Yellow Sea, which has aroused strong doubts and discontent in society. It is not only related to the sustainable social and economic development of Qidong, but also to the vital interests of Qidong's, so it definitely should not been taken lightly. We call upon Qidong Municipal People's Government to truthfully reflect voice of the masses [to the superior], and resolutely stop the Nantong Oji Paper discharging the industrial waste water into the South Yellow Sea through Qidong.⁵⁷

It is the deep divide within the political system on the issue of proposed siting that provided the critical political opportunity for the local activists to exploit. In the mobilization process, they cautiously take advantages of this rift within political institution to frame the collective identity. Firstly, throughout the protest against the proposed project, the activists had not defined the Qidong government as the antagonist rather included those local elites into the collective of “Qidong people” against both “Nantong people” and Japanese. The activists made claims as follows:

Our incumbent (Qidong) municipal government leaders are acting in

⁵⁷ It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

*violation of their conscience under the pressure of Nantong. For the problem of pollution by the Oji Paper, in a word, we can only rely on the millions of people in Qidong. All retired and serving cadres in the government departments, towns and villages are quietly supporting you, they are your strong backing.*⁵⁸

This way the local activists frame the collective identity not only enabled them to gain sympathy and support from within the institution but also to some extent reduce the risks of being suppressed by the local authority.

Secondly, at the time when in the face of suppression by local government, the activists would use the collective identity as a weapon to counterattack the authority. In a petition letter written to the officials of Qidong government, the activists questioned the local officials as follow:

*Why do the Qidong's police suppress the protesters who love our hometown? Qidong people need the government for the welfare of Qidong people, do not need the lackey of Nantong government.*⁵⁹

By defining the Nantong government as the antagonist encroaching the interests of Qidong people, the local activists discredited Qidong government's any attempt to crackdown local citizens' protest against the industrial project proposed

⁵⁸ It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

⁵⁹ It is cited from the mobilization flyer in Qidong.

by the Nantong government. Their framing tactics of collective identity greatly legitimized their claims of collective actions against the proposed project and limited the options which the Qidong authority could use to suppress the protest.

Moreover, the activists strategically connected the anti-Japanese nationalism to their protest which won considerable space for the survival of the movement. The existing literature has documented that China's nationalism is not just spontaneous popular reactive sentiment but also to some extent the component of propaganda project by the state.⁶⁰ Zhao shows that if there was no support by the state, China's nationalism was impossible to emerge so easily in 1990s. In the face of legitimacy crisis after the Tiananmen incident, the Chinese state launched the patriotic education campaign to build "national support for the Communist Regime".⁶¹ There is no doubt that the anti-Japanese is politically correct in China which the activists actually well knew. In an interview with the author, an activist made the remarks as follows:

*The Communist party has always propagated that the small Japanese invaded us in the past, so we say that the Japanese invaded us with pollution now.*⁶²

⁶⁰ Zhao, "A State-led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China"; He, "History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict".

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 300.

⁶² Interview, Qidong, 9 Feb. 2014.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the activists framed their claims against the proposed project prompted by the Nantong government in the banner of nationalism. Even though the decision-maker of the proposed disposal project was the Nantong municipal government not the Qji Paper which was in fact welcomed by Nantong government, the movement activists concentrated their firepower to on the Japanese and Oji Paper rather than the Nantong government especially in the final stage of mobilization of demonstration from May, 2013 to July, 2013. They claimed their protest against the proposed siting of discharge port as protecting their homeland from being polluted by the Japanese. Compared to defining the government as antagonist, it is apparently much safer to protest the Japanese who have feud with Chinese. A key activist explained why they called for people to oppose the Japanese enterprise instead of the Nantong government in the late mobilization as follows:

If we call for opposing the Nantong government, they would say it is counter-revolutionary rebellion, so we shouted “Down with Japan’s Oji Paper!” Actually, the wastewater treatment of Japan’s enterprise is generally better than our domestic business.⁶³

This framing strategy not only facilitated the recruitment of movement participants but also enabled the protesters to seize the moral high ground in the

⁶³ Interview, Qidong, 9 Feb. 2014.

battle against the proposed project which, therefore, to a large extent make their claims irrefutably and increased the cost of the authority to suppress the collective movement.

In sum, through taking advantage of the political opportunity and borrowing the language of the regime such as the anti-Japanese nationalism, Qidong's activists managed to legitimize their claims against the Nantong government's proposed project and maximize the chance of survival of collective movement.

Conclusion

This study unpacks the mobilization mechanism in the emerging environmental protests in China by the case of Qidong in the East China. It suggests that local collective identity takes an essential role in the organizing and mobilization process. The paper firstly elaborates how the activists in Qidong's protest took advantage of the preexisted collective identities to frame the claims to mobilize the potential adherents.

It is suggested that the collective identity should not be just considered as static property of certain group of people but rather a strategy which the discontents could use to sustain the collective actions. As a strategy, the framing of collective identity is not only related to efficiency of mobilizing the potential participants but also to the extent to which their claims are political unimpeachable so as to avoid the risks of being suppressed by the authority as much as possible. In

other words, how the activists frame the collective identity will to some extent determine the fate of the collective actions *per se*. Hence, it has been seen that the local activists shifted between different collective identities – “Qidong people” vs. “Nantong people” and Chinese vs. Japanese – to frame their claims against the proposed project on the basis of certain concrete social context. The local activists consciously made use of the rift within the political system and the popular anti-Japanese nationalism which has been supported by the state to frame the collective identities which helped them gain the sympathy of the elite in the institution and reduce the risk of suppression by the authority so as to sustain the survival of collective actions.

Hence, even though the preexisted collective identity might provide the raw symbolic resources to mobilization of collective protests, it is still necessary for the movement entrepreneurs to frame the collective identity to enhance the internal solidarity and willing to act collectively. In the light of the rising pattern of locality-based environmental popular protests, this paper calls for further empirical study to examine the scope and limits of the local identity in the formation of an environmental movement in China.