Power, Apathy, and Failure of Participation: How Local Voices on Environmental Issues Are Muted in a Chinese Rural Context

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Abstract
Public participation is widely regarded as a vital component for making environmental decisions more democratic, legitimate, and effective. Yet, research on this subject has largely focused on rights and principles instead of context and process, especially in non-Western settings. To address this gap, this article explores how local voices on environmental issues were muted in a Chinese rural context. It describes controversies surrounding a cultural and ecological tourism development in Heyang, a transforming village in the east coastal region of China. Based on semistructured group interviews, the article reveals that although many issues found in the Heyang case resonated with similar cases in Western settings, such as the lack of access to information and the problematic solicitation of public input, fundamentally, the local voices were muted by the village council’s blind adoption of an urban-centric ecological modernization agenda and its neglect of local villagers’ emotional attachment to their land properties. The above findings not only draw our attention to how participatory communication can be compromised by contextual factors but also invite us to reconsider how China’s existing urban–rural division fundamentally influences its ecological civilization.

Keywords
participatory communication, public participation, environmental policy making, China, urban–rural division

Introduction
Engaging the public in environmental policy making is crucial for achieving a sustainable future of our society. Public participation is widely regarded as a vital component for making environmental decisions more democratic, legitimate, and effective. Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has examined how this concept is practiced in a variety of contexts. In a broad sense, the term public participation describes citizen involvement in what and how public policies are made. As Cox (2013) argues, effective public participation in environmental policy making should ensure the ability of citizens to (a) access relevant information, (b) express their concerns, and (c) hold responsible government agencies and businesses accountable. Similarly, Walker (2007) calls for institutional mechanisms that enable people to realize their full potential when engaging with environmental issues.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of public participation for environmental policy making, previous research also documented frequent failures of soliciting public input under existing institutional mechanisms. One pervasive “participatory gap” identified by previous research is that inputs from citizens rarely gain real weight in decision-making processes, which turns the solicitation of public input into a frustrating “decide, announce, and defend” procedure (Senecah, 2004). Walker, Daniels, and Cheng (2006) propose that meaningful public participation embodies the principles of “FAAITH”: fairness, accountability, access, inclusiveness, transparency, and honesty. Yet, in practice, these principles are often compromised by problematic communication practices.

As such, there has been an emerging research agenda in the participation literature, with growing efforts being made beyond the rights and principles of public participation. The field of environmental communication, in particular, calls for a “deliberative turn” in public participation theory and practice. Scholars such as Walker (2007) and Norton (2007) have made a conceptual distinction between

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“participatory communication” and “public participation,” defining the former as interactions with and among citizens that are supported by public dialogue, mutual understanding, and collaborative learning.

In short, the current situation invites us to further explore how actual participatory communications are characterized by the interactions between local conditions and institutional mechanisms. For this purpose, this article will explore the dynamics of participatory communication in rural China. The case study reported below focuses on Heyang, a transforming village in China's east coastal region. In the early 2000s, traditional folk dwellings in Heyang were recognized for their historical values. In 2015, these traditional buildings were further listed as China's national heritage. After achieving this prestigious status, Heyang's village council accelerated its development agenda, hoping to turn Heyang into an ecological and cultural tourist site. This ambitious plan, however, led to growing local tensions regarding economic development, traditional culture reservation, and environmental protection. Before further diving into the Heyang case, however, let us first take an overview of the trends and problems of environmental public participation.

Environmental Participatory Communication: Trends and Problems

Public participation plays a crucial role in providing citizens with “voice” in environmental decisions. Not only does it offer essential social legitimacy for democratic policy making, but it also leads to the development of better environmental policies in many cases. Within current institutional mechanisms, public participation is often addressed by the term civic engagement. Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, and Whitmarsh (2007) defines “engagement” as a personal state of connection with specific public issues at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. Following this definition, civic engagement is supposed to go beyond the state of knowing (i.e., the cognitive level) to produce actual and effective political actions from the public.

Unfortunately, current practices of environmental participation often end up only emphasizing the cognitive aspect of engagement. Political institutions tend to follow the “information deficit” model to develop strategies for soliciting public input. This model is built upon the assumption that public skepticism or hostility toward specific environmental decisions is primarily caused by a lack of respective knowledge among the public (Wynne, 2014). Accordingly, it suggests that the primary concern of public participation during policy making is to inform the public. Guided by this model, policy makers in many countries have implemented a variety of strategies aiming at improving communications between experts and nonexperts, such as increasing the media coverage of certain issues, releasing environmental assessments, and hosting public consultations.

However, the information deficit model has been widely criticized for its technocratic rationality, which tends to give little weight on the affective and behavioral aspects of engagement. This can be especially problematic for environmental policies as many environmental threats do not easily resonate with ordinary citizens' daily lives. Take climate change as an example, several studies (e.g., Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Hmielowski, 2012; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Norgaard, 2011) have noted that the public often demonstrates a certain degree of “blindness” regarding this high-profile issue, showing unwillingness to actively engage with its related discussions. One representative case for such “socially organized denial” is the Norwegian public’s disengagement with climate change documented in Norgaard’s (2011) ethnographic research. Recognized as one of the world’s most livable countries, Norway enjoys a global recognition for its high living quality and clean environment. The Norwegian government also has a reputation for its support of environmental protection. However, as Norgaard’s research shows, the Norwegian public has developed a “collective avoidance” of climate issues due to the emotional distress (e.g., fear, helplessness, and helpless) brought by climate change-related thinking and engagement. Consequently, climate change is kept out of daily conversations by various social and discursive barriers. This dilemma is accurately caught by the title of Norgaard’s book: Living in Denial. Overall, the lack of public participation in climate change and many other environmental issues is not a simple matter of ignorance. As Lorenzoni et al. (2007) summarize, it is a sociocultural phenomenon constructed by a series of individual and social barriers in our daily lives, which are often reinforced by problematic communication practices.

Meanwhile, in terms of participatory communication during environmental policy making, a growing number of studies (e.g., Martin, 2007; Norton, 2007; Senecah, 2004; Walker, 2007) have criticized traditional institutional mechanisms (e.g., public hearings and comment periods) for constructing a one-way information flow in which policy makers and experts simply treat the public as a stakeholder needing to be persuaded. Consequently, informed dialogues are often limited and public participation rarely generates meaningful contributions to final outcomes. Commenting on the muting of public voice in environmental policy making, Senecah (2004) argues that the key to meaningful public participation involves ensuring the access, standing, and influence of citizens. In the same vein, Walker (2007) reminds us that negotiating shared meanings and understandings is crucial for achieving pluralistic public participation processes. Yet, communication practices in traditional public hearings rarely satisfy the above criteria. For instance, in Martin’s (2007) research on the failed citizen engagement during the Allain Duhangan hydropower project in northern India, meaningful public involvement was compromised by the adoption of authoritative and technocratic communication practices. As Martin writes, these practices persist as they primarily function as acts of power that
privilege the interests of dominant stakeholders. In other words, the recognition of the access, standing, and influence of citizens is only the beginning; we also need to better understand how the process of participatory communication interacts with the larger sociopolitical context.

Taken together, participatory communication should go beyond the “top-down” strategies that focus on diffusing information and legitimizing government actions. Theoretically, the growing efforts in exploring meaningful public participation mechanisms are grounded in participatory democracy’s basic principle: People should have a say in public policies and policy makers should be accountable for their decisions (Seneca, 2004). Nevertheless, participatory democracy is far from perfect as a political theory. For advocates of radical democracy such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; Mouffe, 2000), participatory democracy’s emphasis on consensus building leads to the oppression of different opinions and worldviews as power relations imposed by race, class, and gender are ineradicable. Meanwhile, as a political theory first elaborated in Europe and North America, participatory democracy is rooted in the process of Western modernity and urban political experiences formed by “organic solidarity” (Durkheim, 1984), which, if adopted uncritically, is unlikely to adequately address the urban–rural division that remains persistent in the social organizations of many developing countries. The argument here is not meant to neglect the continuous efforts on improving environmental policy-making mechanisms in developing countries. It concerns with the fact that while we agree that current institutional mechanisms of environmental participation do not work, we rarely reflect upon the question whether relevant discussions based on North American and European contexts be equally applicable for developing countries. What should be avoided is an inattentive attitude toward intercultural variations in participatory communication assumptions and political economy specificity. To further illustrate the above argument, the following section will examine the recent development of environmental public participation in China.

**China’s Public Participation in Environmental Policy Making**

In China, environmental policy making relies primarily on administrative measures that are designed and implemented by government agencies. Consequently, public participation in China’s environmental governance has been traditionally constrained within the state and party systems, with different local and sectorial interests only being represented and consulted through a rigidly structured bureaucracy (Kostka & Mol, 2013; Xie, 2016). In recent years, however, it has been suggested that a major transformation is underway in China’s environmental governance, with the central government showing willingness to encourage participation from non-state sectors to overcome the implementation shortcomings caused by conventional state-led policy models. This transformation is vividly demonstrated by formalized public participation measures such as information disclosure and public hearing, flourishing environmental NGOs, and heated online discussions on environmental controversies. For some high-profile cases, such as the Nu River dams project, the Xiamen PX project, and the ongoing smog hazard in Beijing, public participation in a variety of forms has successfully changed official policies and got the voices of nonstate sectors heard (Li, Liu, & Li, 2012). The fledging environmental activism has even prompted discussions on an emerging “green public sphere,” which, according to communication scholars such as Yang and Calhoun (2007), facilitates the democratization of current governing practices in China.

Despite the above progresses, however, effective practices of public participation during environmental policy making remain limited in China for several reasons. To begin with, different government authorities hold varying attitudes toward involving the public in environmental governance. Kostka and Mol (2013) point out that most experiments and innovations targeting the participation gap come from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and its local subsidiaries, which occasionally conflict with existing policies from other more influential ministries. Local authorities may also go against extra scrutiny from the public due to the lack of knowledge and resource, or the fear that it would expose local malpractice (Xie, 2016). Although, in recent years, the central government has made a great effort in promoting the idea of “Green GDP,” it is still common for local authorities in small cities and townships to prioritize GDP growth at the expense of environmental pollution.

In addition, government-initiated public participation often ends up taking place only in the phase of policy implementation, with nonstate sectors being co-opted into governmental interests (Xie, 2016). The rationale behind such problematic approach is that for Chinese government authorities, public participation tends to serve predominately as a strategy of depoliticization. As demonstrated by the public outrages against the Nu River dams project and the Xiamen PX project, environmental concerns could lead to social unrest threatening the state and party systems. To avoid the risk of political contestations, the government authorities often intentionally block opposing voices when consulting with nonstate sectors, and consequently, such biased process discourages genuine public participation.

Finally, ordinary citizens across China have varying attitudes toward participating in policy discussions. Xie (2016) suggests that nonresponse remains the most common public attitude toward policy discussions. On one hand, this attitude results from the traditional fears of the government’s hostility against opposing voices; on the other hand, it also reflects the bitter reality in China’s less developed regions where individuals are unable to contribute to policy making due to a variety of constraints imposed by local contexts. Notably, while information and communication technologies improve
citizens’ access to information and willingness to engage in public discussions, the “green public sphere” tends to be urban-centric. For rural residents, it is difficult to attract media attention, and their outcries often receive tough economic and political oppression from local authorities.

Unfortunately, public participation in rural China has yet to receive sufficient attention in the participation literature. In response to this research gap, the following sections will explore how local voices on environmental issues were muted in Heyang, a transforming village in the east coastal region of China.

**Research Background**

Located in the mountainous region of Zhejiang province, Heyang is a small village with approximately 3,000 residents. Like other villages in this region, life in Heyang is mainly driven by family-based small-scale agriculture for centuries. Although the local economic structure has been gradually diversified since China’s market reforms in the 1980s, agriculture remains central to local villagers who still define themselves primarily as peasants. Since the early 2000s, Heyang has actively engaged in tourism development as its folk dwellings are among the few well-preserved traditional rural architectures in China. The overall goal of this project is to transform Heyang into a popular tourist site with both traditional buildings and natural scenery to visit. The project involves restoring the historical dwellings, relocating a considerable number of residents to new settlements, and transforming some existing farmland for other purposes. However, so far, this development has largely failed due to the lack of support from the villagers, among whom many share different opinions regarding how the historical dwellings and their surrounding natural environment should be preserved and restored.

In early 2015, Heyang was recognized as a Chinese “national cultural heritage site,” and the Zhejiang provincial government promised 5 billion CNY (approximately US$0.81 billion) development fund for the village. This aggressive move further intensified the various conflicts between the local government (i.e., village council) and peasants. During my fieldwork at the village in the summer of 2015, a public outbreak just occurred with a couple of peasants being arrested for protesting a modern sewage project being constructed in the historical dwelling area.

The research findings presented in the following section are primarily based on a 2-week field research, which is part of the “global to village: grounding communication research” project led by Professor Yuezhi Zhao from Simon Fraser University. During the 2-week field research, our research group conducted field observation, listened to background briefings from local officials, and held semistructured focus groups with ordinary residents. While the field observation and communications with local officials provided us with a better understanding of Heyang’s local dynamics, the focus groups were designed to hear from grassroots voices regarding local affairs. The findings from the research activities were then used to reflect upon established communication theories (development communication, political economy of communication, cultural studies, etc.) in the context of contemporary rural China. For my part of the project, I focused on what trigged the villagers’ strong resistance toward the ecological/cultural tourism project.

In terms of focus group, this method was chosen for its capacity of stimulating group discussions on “hot” local issues among the participants. Its interactive nature reduced pressure on the participants, which was crucial when contentious issues were discussed. The method also allowed us to collect a large amount of data within a relatively short time frame.

The participants were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball method. With the assistance of local officials, a total of 94 Heyang adult residents (58 male and 36 female) of age 18 and above participated in the focus group discussions. These participants were from different educational and income levels, and they represented the 36 “production teams” (a legacy of the commune system from Mao era) in Heyang, with each contributing two to three participants. As determined by Heyang’s current demographic, most participants are middle to old age residents. As some of the participants were more comfortable to voice their experiences in Heyang’s local dialect, the discussions were facilitated by volunteer translators.

A total of eight focus group sessions were hosted. During each session, the 12 members of the research project were divided into four smaller groups based on our research themes. Each group held its own focus group with up to six attendants, and each researcher interacted with the participants for approximately 40 to 60 min. For my research, I interacted with a total of 37 participants during the eight focus group sessions. The following guiding questions were asked to elicit the reactions, opinions, and conversations from these participants. These questions were designed based on my field observation and conversation with local authorities:

1. How do you understand the concept of “environmental protection”?
2. Are you aware of any environmental problems in cities?
3. How about Heyang? Are you aware of any local environmental issues?
4. How was the water quality of the local river a couple of years ago? Has there been any noticeable change of the river in recent years?
5. I learn that there have been a lot of controversies regarding the sewage improvement project, what is your opinion(s) on this issue?
6. In your opinion, will there be noticeable tensions between the eco-tourism development and
environmental protection? For instance, the increase of tourists may lead to the increase of garbage, or they may interrupt your normal daily lives?

7. If you were asked to make environment-related suggestions to the village council, what suggestion(s) would you make?

8. Recently the national government has promoted the notion of “ecological civilization,” how shall we build Heyang to fit the requirements of this proposal?

All the focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed in Mandarin. The data were then analyzed qualitatively using NVivo software. The analytical focus was the participants’ common opinions regarding Heyang’s cultural/ecological tourism development and their rationales of opposing the project. The analysis also paid special attention to the discursive mechanisms used by the local authority to encourage public participation and the effectiveness of these mechanisms.

Empirical Findings

Overall, participants in all focus groups were very critical of the ways Heyang’s cultural/ecological tourism had been developed and expressed serious doubts about the project’s prospect, which was in line with the field observation and interviews with local officials. According to these officials, the primary cause of the villagers’ resistance toward the tourism project was their lack of knowledge of related policies. In the words of one local official,

Admittedly, our “protective development” of the historical dwellings has not gone very well as many villagers who currently live there only want to get better living conditions by renovating their old houses. This would go against our reservation policies. We (the village council) see the current situation as a conflict between national policies and local conditions and we are trying our best to educate and communicate with the villagers. (Interview with a Heyang official, July 3, 2015)

Echoing the above comment, many other officials I interviewed considered fixing the “information deficit” as the key to better involve villagers in the implementation of Heyang’s development agenda. Yet, the lack of knowledge or interest seems inadequate to account for the strong resentment I felt during the focus groups. The participants held strong and uniformly negative responses to the undergoing sewage installment (the latest trigger of local conflicts) and expressed deep levels of distrust toward the village council’s ability to fulfill its promises. For many, the tourism project was a seemingly endless process that had never produced any benefit. One common expression shared by the focus group participants was “historical dwellings have turned into terrible dwellings.”

Due to preservation requirements, villagers living in the historical dwellings were not allowed to modify or renovate their houses, and this policy had left many villagers with horrible living condition. Although this issue was acknowledged by local officials and several plans had been proposed aiming at improving the living condition of peasants remaining at the historical dwellings, these plans failed to receive support from the villagers and some of them even openly protested it. As one participant put it,

The current progress of ecotourism development is simply unacceptable. We have been dragged into this for so many years and there is no benefit at all. In fact, the project has done a lot of harm to us. We can’t renovate our houses and the road (in the historical dwelling area) is left unrepaired for years. (Participant 1, Group 5)

Similar expressions can be found across all focus groups. These expressions were not merely the participants’ complaints. For many villagers, the slow progress in the historical dwellings’ restoration and its related issues in fact served as indicators of the village council’s incompetence. Commenting on these issues was thus viewed as an antipolitical ritual by the participants, which in turn intensified their resistant stance to the eco-tourism project.

Then, what factors contributed to the formation of such resistant stance among the participants? A close examination of the focus group discussions clearly shows that the villagers lacked adequate access to policy information, especially how certain policies were designed. The entire plan of transforming Heyang into a cultural/ecological site was conducted in a confusing “half-light” without sufficient transparency, which led to the local community’s concern on not being able to learn and participate in the plan’s implementation details. As one focus group talked about the meaningless public consultations,

Speaking of delegate meetings, they are pretty useless. You just go there and listen to the officials speaking about the policies . . . No matter how you go against their decisions, the decisions will be implemented anyway. (Participant 3, Group 7)

That’s better than what we have now. Let me tell you, because the officials are afraid of being criticized. They don’t hold regular delegate meetings now. The last delegate meeting was 6 months ago when we were asked to elect some officials. (Participant 5, Group 7)

The lack of collaborative discussions seemed to be the central issue of Heyang’s dilemma, and it was mainly driven by the village council’s insistence on its “definitional hegemony” in determining the priorities within the eco-tourism project, which had turned the delegate meetings in to “decide-announce-defend” performances instead of opportunities for collaborative discussions. One controversy illustrating this tension was the slow progress of road improvement in the
A historical dwelling area. The focus group participants were extremely disappointed by the village council’s inaction on this issue, which to many should have been considered as a priority in Heyang’s development blueprint.

We knew that we cannot build cement roads in the historical dwelling area because they will destroy the area’s original look. However, it’s difficult to walk on the roads during rainy days and we just don’t understand why they can’t find a solution. In fact, I have raised funds with a couple of other villagers to renovate the roads in front of our doors and the village council just came and destroyed what we have built . . . Whatever we say is meaningless to the village council and we have cried out our throats. (Participant 2, Group 3)

The village council has spent millions in restoring the ancestral hall without asking us whether the money should be spent anywhere else. (Participant 4, Group 2)

Yeah, see the damn road we walk on? We have complained about it for a long time and the village council simply covers its ears. (Participant 2, Group 2)

Another interesting yet troubling finding of the focus group discussions was how the local voice was muted by the prevalence of technocratic/elite discourse. Unlike similar practices found in the Western context, however, the technocratic/elite discourse was mainly caused by the discrimination against villagers’ local knowledge, which was associated with China’s noticeable urban–rural division. China’s astounding and complex transformations since the 1980s have brought a series of huge environmental challenges. Compared with urban areas where the landscape is fully transformed through the integration into global capitalism, villages in China tend to be cleaner yet underdeveloped. Accordingly, two conflicting images regarding rural lifestyle are formed in China’s social imagination: While the rural lifestyle is more nature-oriented and villages next to urban areas can be ideal destinations for escaping from mundane and polluted urban lives, it is also inferior and backward, and peasants are inspired by the modern lifestyles of urban residents, willing to pursue that lifestyle even at any cost.

In the Heyang case, while the former image motivated its tourism development, the latter explained why expert voices, rather than local villagers’ comments, were given more weight in the policy-making process. During my visit, the sewage system at Heyang’s historical dwelling area was being upgraded. Many villagers opposed this project because its septic tank, in their view, was built too close to the village’s water source. However, their opposition was turned down because the sewage system was designed by experts from the Zhejiang province.

We have complained many times that the septic tank is too close to the village’s water source but the village council just says that the system has no problem and it is designed by experts from the (Zhejiang) province. What kind of experts are they? They just came here for three days and then drew the blueprint, without asking anyone living here. We have lived here for all of our lives and I talk you, sooner or later there will be problem with the septic tank will have problems. (Participant 2, Group 2)

As the tourism development requires relocating hundreds of villagers in the historical dwellings to newly built modern houses, land redistribution becomes a focal point in the policy-making process. For the participants, their fear of the process originated not only from the lack of access to information but also from the potential loss of their peasant identity. One participant shared her concern regarding Heyang’s future:

I know that I will be compensated if my farmland is taken, but what would happen to my children? With no farmland, they will not be peasants anymore. (Participant 1, Group 8)

Yes, you asked us what “ecological dream” we have, here is my answer. I hope one day that when I walk out of my door, its clean outside and the roads are covered by trees . . . I will still stick to farm because that’s what I am. We are peasants anyway and farmland is our lifeblood. (Participant 2, Group 8)

Virtually all focus group participants featured similar discussions lamenting the importance of farmland to them. While the loss of farmland is generally categorized as an economic concern, how the participants link farmland to the maintenance of their peasant identity offered an interesting perspective to understand the holistic view on human–nature relation in Chinese traditional culture and its manifestation in the participants’ daily lives. Such assessments were almost never grounded in evidence but instead were confirmed in the form of common sense and intuition.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The complicated situation in Heyang presents a unique case for understanding the dynamics of environmental policy making and public participation in rural China, which, to some extent, has meaningful implications for examining public participation in eco-tourism projects of other developing countries. While the lack of meaningful participatory communications in the Heyang case can be attributed to the favor of one-way information flow and the lack of transparency, other factors unique to China’s political economy were also manifested during the policy-making process. Confronted by increasing environmental degradation, the Chinese government has made great efforts in improving its environmental decision making. As shown in the above findings, however, these efforts are still challenged by problematic participatory communication practices. Here, I shall conclude with three broad claims about the role that communication plays in advancing environmental engagement mechanisms in China’s less developed regions.
First, the Heyang case points to three key dimensions of participatory communication: communication practices, relations of power, and sociopolitical contexts (Martin, 2007; Senecah, 2004). These dimensions are interrelated with each other, and a comprehensive assessment of environmental policy making requires taking all of them into consideration. In Heyang, while the village council’s abuse of power is indeed the primary cause of the public engagement failure, solving this dilemma also needs to consider how urban–rural division in China leads to the discrimination of local knowledge and how deeply peasants are attached to their farmland. As Martin (2007) points out, “an obvious first step towards public participation that is truly participatory is full compliance with the measures that have been adopted to require it” (p. 188).

Nevertheless, this is by no means an easy task in China. On one hand, public participation mechanisms have only established recently and consequently that their implementation in the rural context is quite limited. On the other hand, issues such as urban–rural division and land redistribution are unique to the contemporary Chinese society, which beg locally grounded solutions. Therefore, it is not enough to simply introduce existing regulatory measures to developing countries, public engagement that is truly participatory can be only achieved if the variations of local conditions are recognized and respected.

Second, the Heyang case also invites us to rethink the gravity of China’s ecological civilization process. In 2007, the Chinese central government issued a national strategic document aiming at transforming its industrial capital-oriented economy into a new mode of “ecological civilization,” and to date, most efforts made on this goal is urban-centric, emphasizing the construction of “green industry.” Yet, the path to a green economy is not necessarily urban-based. In many ways, the dynamics observed in Heyang is indicative of the “village rationality” (Wen, Lau, Cheng, He, & Qiu, 2012) deriving from China’s traditional rural culture of sustainable self-reliance. As Wen et al. (2012) argues, such eco-centric notion should play a greater role in China’s path to an ecological future, given agriculture production remains the foundation for the country’s 1.3 billion population: “today’s problems require different ways of thinking, and the abandonment of rigid modernization schemes for forms of thought that respect local, indigenous culture” (para. 23).

Finally, Heyang residents’ deep connection with land suggests the potential of incorporating the notion of “spatial justice” in future conversations on environmental participatory communication. Soja (2010) defines “spatial justice” as a theoretical turn to the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice. Like the widely addressed “environmental justice,” spatial justice is concerned with the distribution of spatial resources and people’s equal access to them. Central to this concept is the idea that justice and injustice are built into the geographical aspect of everyday life. In the current case, we see how fair land redistribution becomes a central goal of meaningful participatory communication. Although land redistribution is somewhat unique to China, environmental movements have never separated from spatial struggles, from the selection of industrial sites to the distribution of toxic materials. As such, it is worth considering whether the realization spatial justice would be recognized as a basic assumption of future environmental engagement mechanism. To a large extent, land remains the fundamental drive of many environmental movements in the Global South, from the “food sovereignty” movement in South America to the “Idle No More” movement in North America.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Professor Yuezhi Zhao from Simon Fraser University for her enormous help during the research field work and her constructive suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I would also thank Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship for its support of my research at Simon Fraser University, and the editors and reviewers from Sage Open for their insightful comments throughout the peer review process.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Public hearing mechanisms in China have only been established over the past decade. As a result, the public consultations in Heyang have been conducted via the traditional form of delegate meeting: delegates gather and discuss local issues with village officials.
2. Land in rural China is collectively owned and generally administrated by village councils.

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