



Investigation on the Power Source of Public Participation in Environmental Issues in China

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Abstract

Why can the public participate in environmental issues? What is the motive for them to do so? When we specify environment resources with benefits and focus on the real motivation created after that, the reason for Chinese public participation in environmental issues forwardly is clear. Furthermore, this paper also points out the process that the public taking part in the environmental issues and resolving living problems together is a mechanism of social study as well as a process for improving the quality of democracy.

Key words: Environment resource; Environmental interests; Quality of democracy

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“The interests of the individual life, interests of private property, freedom for concluding a contract, and freedom of speech and so on can all be treated as personal interests”. Interests is a very important goal for people to work for and fight for. The contest in environmental interests and environmental resources reflect that people are not just satisfied with the need of safety but also other needs like Maslow revealed. People’s fundamental needs are of different levels. There are physiological needs, needs for safety, needs for belonging and love, needs for respect and development. Environmental interests and environmental resources are of significant impact in

modern society; therefore, the needs for environmental interests are the most important aims during the process of public participation in environmental issues.

1. INTERESTS OF ENVIRONMENT RESOURCES

The occupation and distribution of environment resources and environmental interests is the aims for public participation in environmental issues and also the motive for them to do so.

The reasons for making the above statement based on a precondition that in modern society, environment has been categorized as “resources” and also specified with “interests”. Before making any decision upon the two problems, we need to figure out what is the “environment”. The concept of environment is very familiar with people, however, it is still not very easy to give a common definition on it. And, under different disciplines, the environment has distinguishing meanings which has made it more complicated. The famous Webster Dictionary gives a general definition on “environment” that is “the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded”. It is also explained further as “a: the complex of physical, chemical, and biotic factors (as climate, soil, and living things) that act upon an organism or an ecological community and ultimately determine its form and survival.” “b: “the aggregate of social and cultural conditions that influence the life of an individual or community (WANG, 2000, p.213).” We can see that the first part of the definition starts from the view of nature sciences and the rest of it just describes humane social environment from the aspect of social sciences. At present, every country’s environment legislation is based on the nature sciences aspect and defines environment from the view that “protecting environment is protecting human’s health”. Environment has been defined as the space that human living in besides themselves (WANG, 2000, p.212-217).

Before human society and the practice activities of human beings, material world is unified and cannot be divided. Ever since the come into being of human beings, people's practice activities have changed the original outlook of the world. With the expansion of human activities and the improvement of technology skills, nature has gradually lost its mysterious sides and been taken controlled by people. Apparently, people have become the centre of the universe and also the centre of value and meanings. The practice activities upon nature world are also based on the requirement of human beings. This requirement is reflected as that people treat nature environment as a ceaseless treasury. Nature environment has been transformed into "resources" that can promote economic development by human beings and also instrument for meeting people's needs. Just based on this circumstance, we can say, in modern society, environment has been categorized as "resources".

Interests is a concept that everyone can basically understand. Everything in our life cannot exist without the fundamental fact of interests. Lenin said that interests is the most sentimental nerve in human lives. The Marxist theory thinks that "every society has to meet the material needs for life which is to fulfill the material interest of people" (WANG, 2001, p.33). From this we can see, interests base on fulfilling people's need. People's requirement is the foundation of interest and the practical content of interests is made up by the required objects of people.

"Interests have to give people certain satisfaction in some degree or some methods, that is to say, the realization of interests must be based on the existence of the required objects. Without any real required objects, even if the spiritual requirement objects, there are no interests at all" (WANG, 2001, p.69-70). The real required objects of human being can either be materialized or spiritual. It can be man made products and also nature objects. When the required object of people is environment, it will be reflected in the form of environmental interests. For example, Professor Cai Shouqiu thinks: "since people's environment is the requirement of human being; it is elements, conditions, and objects that used for meeting the needs of people, thus, environment is people's interests which is the environmental interests (CAI, 2003, p.60)". "For human being, environment resource is firstly an interest called the environmental resources interests (shorten as environmental interests) (CAI, 2003, p.21)." It is thus clear that, environmental interests are the satisfaction of people's environmental needs. What closely connected with environmental interests is the nature attribute which is a concept that people connect with his or her needs, if there is no need for people, there is no attribute at all. As far as the depth and width of human's knowledge, there are mainly three nature attributes: economic attribute, ecological attribute, and spirituality (LÜ, 2003, p.21). The economic attribute of nature reflected as human's production practices and the

process of transferring nature. Detailed speaking, the above mentioned "reclamation" which is the economic value represented by nature. The ecological attribute refers that "from the biological point of view, nature resource is necessary elements in human life and development. Along with human, it constitutes mutual flourished ecological system by energy movement, material circulation, and information transfer (LÜ, 2003, p.24)." The ecological attribute showed as a circular, balance, and unnoticed attribute. "Only when the ecological system is unbalanced, people can feel the real value of ecology (LÜ, 2003, p.25)." For example, forest can create clean air for human that is why human can breathe fresh and favorable air. Uncontaminated water "can provide drinkable water source for human as well as ecological environment for aquatic organism and water cycle of the ecosystem (LÜ, 2003, p.25)." The spiritual attribute mainly refers to "the class attribute of nature which is also the aesthetic value for people (LÜ, 2003, p.27)." "The aesthetic value of environment resources is undeniable. When nature science technology has transferred nature as objectification, literatures, aesthetics, and arts are all facing the same nature. The aesthetic consciousness is controlled by nature force; it is not simply a self-reclusive subjective phenomenon but naturally expression of nature's beauty (LÜ, 2007, p.149)." Environment pollution sometimes directly destroys human's aesthetic value upon nature. Calm living conditions, fresh air, and warm wind are all environmental needs of modern people. From generalized view, human's environment interests have been reflected in the needs for nature's economic attribute, ecological attribute and spiritual attribute. So to speak, in modern society, environment has been made "interested" that in detail reflected as the above mentioned materialized and spiritualized needs for environment.

2. PROPULSIVE ATTRIBUTE OF ENVIRONMENT INTERESTS

Why do people's occupation and distribution on environment resources and environment interests become goals for the public to attend environmental issues? We need to start from the internal connection between environmental issues, occupation and distribution of environment resources, and environment distribution. The generation of environmental problems was triggered by people's practices from the beginning. Treat environment as ex parte resource that can be easily get and object that used for meeting people's needs that can be randomly explored and predate are the origin of environmental problems. The increasing environment problems have also enlarged people's need for better environment. However, due to environment resource crisis made by people's ceaseless squeeze on nature environment, proper distribution and occupation on environment resource and interests have

been facing challenges. In addition, during the fight for environment resource, there are losers in enjoying environmental interests. The reason why this situation occurs is depending on the characteristics of environmental goods. "Economics concludes two characteristics of different items: rivalrous attribute and excludability. Items that have both characteristics are private items while the ones that do not have both characteristics are pure public items such as national defense (GU, Environment Law Research website). Environmental items which have both characteristics of items are different from other private items. The excludability refers that environment is the space for human life; it cannot be owned by a single person to exclude others' usages, for instance, the cleanness of atmosphere and balanced ecological system are excludable, it is impossible to restrict usage of this kinds of benefits from anyone or any social organizations for the cost of the restriction is extremely high. However, environmental items are rivalrous. Any pollution can bring degeneration of environment quality which will definitely decrease the possibilities for other people's usage on the same items. The "Tragedy of the commons" suggested by Harding is just caused by environmental items' excludability and rivalrous features (GU, Environment Law Research website). Since environmental items are rivalrous, in the real environment resource competition and restriction wars, interest groups win at last by using their rigorous groups and strong economic power. They have taken control of most resources while the public are the weak side which can only enjoy the remains of a meal for their dispersibility and poor economic power. What is even worse, the enjoyment of environmental interests in reality is not balanced. "The excludability of environmental interests does not mean environmental interests are securable naturally, on the contrary, the distribution of good environment is never balanced. Different geological regions and social groups may have totally different environmental interests (GU, Environment Law Research website)." The wealthy can distribute space selectively as living space and working space due to their economic power but the lower level people of the society have to endure the fact of environment pollution. It is just because the poor level does not have the complete ability to choose living and working spaces and furthermore their environmental interests have been deprived. Meanwhile, environment pollution suffered by the disadvantaged groups is caused by the environment injustice. "Environmental interests belong to industrialists and businessmen while damages generated from them are suffered by the under-privileged people (GU, Environment Law Research website)." The environment justice movement happened in early 1980s in the USA is an anti-racialism movement in environment during which they protested the unbalanced installation of waste treatment equipments and polluting industries in colored and poor people's living areas.

Environmental problems started from the arbitrarily exploration in environment but in reality the detailed reflection of this origin is the above mentioned contradictions between environmental interests distribution and occupation. That is to say, at the beginning, environmental problems were caused by people's practices toward nature which is a relation between human and nature or environment. Through the analysis from above, we can see that environmental problems are not just purely problems in the material aspects of nature but also relationship problems between people in social lives. The two aspects combined together have made the environmental problems much more complicated. Thus, the resolution of environmental problems and management on environment are not merely depending on the development of science and technologies if the contradictions between environment resource and environmental interests occupation and distribution and tense relation between people cannot be handled.

Aiming at environmental problems, how to find a proper and effective method to operate comprehensive ecological management has been troubling people for a long time. As long as environmental problems have connections with environment resource and environmental interests occupation and distribution and people's relationship in social lives, then it is not a bad idea to resolve environmental problems from the perspective of human relations. The reason for this conceive originates from the aspect that interests have impetus on people. In 18th century, French materialist Claude Adrien Helvetius thought that interest is the only element that functions generally in social lives. Marx thought that pursue of interest is the motive for all social activities of human and everything people asked and fought for is connected with their interests. Interests are the fundation of social life, the only commonly working social development power, and the origin of social contradictions. All complicate and comprehensive social phenomena can be explained by interests. It is thus clear that interests have made up the motive of human actions and its aim it to meet people's requirements. Accordingly, environmental interests have become people's motive in environmental affairs. People's participation in environmental affairs is to fulfill their requirements in environment. Since the needs for environment is based on the economic attribute, ecological attribute and spiritual attribute, it has reflected as a diversified, homologous requirement. The people that need environmental interests are the subject of environmental interests. No matter individuals or groups, they have been competing for interests with each other through environmental conflicts. From the environment justice movement of the USA and Chinese Xiamen Haicang PX case, we can both find that ordinary people's sensitive feelings upon environmental interests. Public participation in environmental issues is just different environmental interests subjects compromising with each other under the

same environment. Based on the satisfaction of people's need on environment, environment resource and interests' occupation and distribution tension make up the motive for the public's participation in environmental issues. Thus, we can see that the attention and awareness of people on their surrounding environmental issues has close connection with the advantages and disadvantages of people. Generally, issues that have closer connection with people's environmental interests are being paid more attention than others and meanwhile, people's willingness and enthusiasm is also higher.

3. POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

When environment safety has been closely paid attention to by people, distribution of environment resources and interests has been de facto rejected by people who are harmed by environment, people will always take part in environment issues management positively. Normally, most people participate in environmental issues are those whose interests and safety directly related but it is not excluded that people without direct relation to detailed environmental issues. In 2007, in the Xiamen PX case, we can see that there are not only Xiamen's public participating in environment issues, but also many other people that do not have direct linkage with this case. For instance, what has made the Xiamen PX case a public event is ZHAO Yufen academician and around one hundred CPPCC members' joint proposal. However, among these people, most of them do not have direct safety or interests connection with the case; there are also many other people around the country who are not directly connected from either safety or interests aspect with the event attended this event by various forms such as text messages and internet. All of them have shown that people's basic requirements are not just limited to safety and interests. People's requirements are varied from multiple levels. In the process of people's wide participation, people express their opinions upon problems occurred during the controlling procedure of the government. It has shown that public participation in environmental issues can promote the development of society, strengthen political stability, slow down the sense of alienation upon political power, and help cultivate the formation of the public's awareness and attention on public affairs. Due to the problems occurred in modern society environment, the public strongly require that the government has its own voice during formulating environment standards and applying environmental decisions. From our opinion, the ultimate purpose for the public participating in environmental issues is to realize practical influence upon activities effecting human environment, and at last, to make environment standards and environmental control that made by the government could reflect or meet the

needs and real interests of the participants. Meanwhile, it has also made up problems brought by the government during environmental management. In addition, among the process of public participation in environmental issues, they can clearly understand the operation of environmental policies and can also express their opinions when the government is making decisions. At the same time, because the practical influence imposed by the public on environmental decision can definitely transferred into input elements in environmental decisions and to reach the aim of effecting environmental policies and decisions, "in modern society, the public take part in environmental protection is the extension of participating in national political public lives in the aspect of environmental protection which also shows the attention paid by the public to their own living quality and life values." Simultaneously, according to the view of Lenin, the reason that the public need a country is to educate the public to go to democracy; they do not only require the democratic forms of representatives or organs, they need to build a country that managed by themselves and let them have the opportunity to take part in every level of social lives, and let the public have positive effects in managing the country. When the public can take part in the process of negotiating environmental issues, their requests can be heard and be respected. This process that allowing the participants taking part in detailed life scenes and resolving and facing living problems is a social study mechanism itself. It does not focus on short-period political consequences, but also make actions via introspection and critiques, and understand social changes and importance of public interests which is a long process of improving democracy quality.

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