



Legitimization Communication Tactics of Environmental NGOs in China: A Case Study of Greenpeace

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Abstract

In the authoritarian state of China, non-governmental organizations (NGO) are consistently exposed to the issue of legitimacy. Compared to China's grass-rooted NGO, international non-governmental organization (INGO) receives more scrutiny from Chinese government due to a longstanding ideological distrust, or as defined in this study, the double legitimization dilemma. Whereas traditional party-state media have been vigilant to NGOs, the booming Social Networking Sites (SNSs) provide alternative discursive resources for these organizations. Hence, this study adopts a critical discourse analysis approach to examine how the legitimacy of INGOs operating on Chinese soil is discursively constructed on Sina Weibo (Weibo) amid double legitimization dilemma. Based on a comparative study of Greenpeace (GP), an international environmental NGO that has operated in China since 1997, and Friends of Nature (FON), a grass-rooted environmental NGO founded in 1994, this study aims to answer three specific questions: what are the discursive strategies used to construct the legitimacy of INGOs on Chinese soil; how do these strategies develop over time and if INGOs and grass-rooted NGOs differ in their legitimization strategies. For the specific purpose of this study, the "smog" issue is selected and a total of 290 Weibo posts (164 by GP and 126 by FON) are collected for a discourse analysis. Based on a modified version of Theo van Leeuwen's framework of the discursive construction of legitimization, this study finds GP's legitimization endeavor is mostly invested on moralization and rationalization, and, over time, to an increasing extent, on authorization and de-politicization; mythopoesis is marginally used. Besides, GP and FON are significantly different in the use of the five legitimization categories.

Overall, Greenpeace turns from a "fearless activist" into a "mild advocate" over the years, which, to some extent, has departed from its mission of promoting "environmental activism" and "social change". This article proposes that the diverse legitimization strategies used by GP are effective in obtaining organization legitimacy and making advocacy in China.

Keywords: Environmental INGO; Discursive legitimization; China; SNS; Greenpeace; Friends of nature

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Introduction

In the authoritarian state of China, non-governmental organizations (NGO) are consistently exposed to the issue of legitimacy in legal and institutional systems [1,2]. Compared to China's grass-rooted NGO, international non-governmental organization (INGO) receives more scrutiny from Chinese government and the ruling party: on the one hand, the slow-progressed regulation and policies create substantial hardships

for INGO registration and operation [3]; on the other hand, the accelerating legislation since 2004 renders a great number of INGOs "illegal"¹. Amid China's increasing distrust towards INGO and a growing fear of foreign threats to "national security"², INGO faces a double legitimization dilemma on Chinese soil: the first

¹See http://ngo.mps.gov.cn/ngo/portal/view.do?p_articleId=22902&p_topmenu=1, search date Feb 2, 2018

²See <http://npc.people.com.cn/GB/28320/412012/index.html>, search date Feb 2, 2018

dilemma is involved with the intrinsic vigilance the authoritarian government holds against “non-government” [4]; the second dilemma touches on the ideological divergence between a socialist country and “Western values” [5].

As regards the interaction between China’s contemporary social organizations and the government, the scholarship has attempted to construe the processes from two perspectives: the civil society perspective [6] and the corporatism perspective [7]. Both perspectives focus on how the organizations employ political opportunities to promote activism goals without an adequate concern for ideological context. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) approaches the legitimation issue with a concern for socio-political context centrally including power relations and ideologies [8,9].

Therefore, this study adopts the CDA approach to examine how the legitimacy of INGO carried out on Chinese soil is discursively constructed amid double legitimation dilemma. Especially, the focus of the study is on environmental INGOs operating in China due to the fact that environmental INGOs have enjoyed the fastest growth among all social organizations in the past years and have allegedly become the most influential among all NGOs [10]. According to a 2018 report revealed by China Development Brief (CDB)³, the number of environmental INGOs has increased to 72 and comprises 25% of the total number INGOs operation in China, which is highest in all types? It has also increased by 2% compared to a report released in 2017⁴. Hence, this study argues a focus on environmental INGOs will reveal new and nuanced findings due the “rich and successful” legitimation experiences they have displayed.

Research Background

INGO development in China

NGOs on Chinese soil are comprised of three categories: the governmental NGO, grass-rooted NGO and INGO⁵. Han (2013) identifies four stages of INGO development in China:

- 1) The Opium War (1840) to 1950s. At this stage, faith-based organizations and NGOs with religious background are the main actors;
- 2) 1950s to 1970s. During this time, INGOs are regarded as “imperial counterforce” and shut out of China’s new regime;
- 3) 1970s to 1990s. With the end of Cultural Revolution, a small number of INGOs started to operate in China again and were actively involved in giant panda protection and disaster relief work;
- 4) 1992 to present. Along with China’s entering in WTO, INGOs started to experience fast-paced development and extend the focus from education, charity to environmental protection, domestic violence, social equality, and so forth.

This study proposes a fifth stage beginning with the year 2004 to

³See <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/>, search date Feb 2, 2018

⁴See <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/news-19734.html>, search date Feb 2, 2018.

⁵See China Youth Development Foundation. (2001). *China’s Social Organizations at the Crossroad 2000*. Tianjin: Tianjin People Publishing House

present. In 2004, “color revolution” broke out in the former Soviet republics Ukraine and Georgia and Beijing administration alleged a pioneering influence of INGOs in this “revolution”, especially Albert Einstein Institution and its supporting foundations. After this, China accelerates the legislation of INGO and in 2016 passed China’s Overseas NGO Management Law, one that is viewed as “the culmination of China’s long-standing distrust of foreign NGOs”⁶. The new law took effect in January 1 of 2017 and requires INGOs to register with Chinese police and the Ministry of Public Security before beginning operations. This was considered by Western governments and rights advocates as “a move to restrict the already tight space for NGO operations”⁷.

SNS as alternative discursive resource

Media plays an important role in discursive construction. In line with the Neo-Authoritarianism proposed by Karmel [11], China’s media system has experienced huge changes in the past decades, transforming from pure propaganda tools to an aggregate that combines multiple functions of publicity, culture, economy and social services (Winfield and Peng, 2005). But as the so-called “Chinese Party Publicity Inc.” [12], the traditional media holds a vigilant attitude towards non-governmental social actors. In such circumstances, the booming Social Networking Sites (SNS) offers alternative discursive resources [13]. In fact, ever since 1999, China’s NGOs have been actively utilizing internet and social media for legitimation and activism goals [14].

Sina Weibo (Weibo) is one of the most popular social media that has dominated China’s microblog market since 2009 [15]. The number of Weibo users enjoyed an explosive growth in 2010, in which year, the degree of breadth and depth Chinese netizens got involved in social public events and public policy also reached an unprecedented level [16]. Due to its decentralization function in information communication, Weibo significantly extends the discursive space for social organizations in an “Enlarged Media Ecology” [17]. As of Feb 8th 2018, all the environmental NGOs operating in China that are included by China Development Brief (CDB)⁸ had opened Weibo accounts.

Theoretical Foundation

Organizational legitimation and critical discourse analysis

The concept of legitimacy originates from the sociologist Weber [18] for whom it meant the acceptable exercise of power. Suchman [19] points out that legitimacy is tied to socially construct system of norm, values, belief and definitions, which can be regarded as a feature of individuals or organizations. The legitimacy of an organization has been described as a set of normative criteria that the organization meets in society [20]. Organizational legitimation is the process in which legitimacy is built and maintained [19,21,22]. Researchers see this process as

⁶See <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/china-passes-foreign-ngo-law-amid-national-security-push/>, search date Feb 2, 2018

⁷See <https://journal-neo.org/2015/07/25/china-s-ngo-law-counteracting-western-soft-power-and-subversion/>, search date Feb 2, 2018

⁸CBD was created in 1996 and registered as an NGO named “Beijing E-share Civil Society Center”. It is China’s first independent information platform on civil society, see <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/about-us/>.

twofold, including organizational reforms to convince different “social constituencies of legitimation” [23] and legitimation communication within discourse (esp. speech and text).

There are many ways to conduct organizational discourse analysis [24,25]. The CDA draws from post-structuralist discourse theory, and it utilizes methodologies developed in applied linguistics [26]. In CDA, discursive events are seen as being simultaneously pieces of text, instances of discursive practice, and instances of social practice. Discourses are linguistically mediated constructions that sustain and reinforce ideologies [27]. It offers empirical tools to examine the relationship between legitimacy and specific discourses [28].

In line with this thinking, Van Leeuwen [29] introduced a framework of four legitimation strategies that elaborate how discourse construct legitimation for social practices and for public communication. These strategies are authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation and mythopoesis, which are further divided into sub-strategies and minor categories. Although van Leeuwen’s framework is highly elaborate and operational, researchers have found space for modification and redefinition. Halme [30] identified an overlap of rationalization and moral evaluation in a research on project discursive construction. Joutsenvirta [31] identified new discursive legitimation strategies based on van Leeuwen’s framework in a study on firm–NGO relationship. Mirhosseini [32] added minor categories to the major category of moralization in a discursive analysis of a war speech.

Discursive legitimation of NGOs on Chinese soil

The scholarship has approached the legitimacy issue of Chinese NGOs from combined perspectives of political opportunities and discursive opportunities. The study of Zeng, et al. [10] examined the important role of mainstream media in resource mobilization in environmental social movements. Through an invest in media authority, the movers employed “Policy Window” [33] to realize activism goals. The “empowerment” function of traditional media is also identified by Luo [34]. In her study of a Chinese grass-rooted animal protection organization, Luo utilizes “strategic framing” theory and identifies a frame transition from “civil society” to “food safety” over time, the effects of which deconstruct the underlying conflict with the local government. A comparison of the studies by Zeng [10] on Chinese grass-rooted environmental NGO “Friends of Nature” [35] and Huang [13] on a grass-rooted charity organization “Love Save Pneumoconiosis” (LSP) reveals a narrative transition from “heroism” to “humanizing”, which cancels the opposite stance NGOs hold against the government. Gleiss [1] pays attention to discursive struggles by LSP and found the activists’ discourses are depoliticized expressions that avoids mentioning the government’s inaction and institutional flaws.

A review of these studies shows a growing interest in discursive construction by NGOs in Chinese context. There are three findings: the framing theory is currently the most employed framework by researchers; a de-politicization strategy or the so-called “minimal politics” strategy as defined by Gleiss [1] both in discourse and action is widely perceived; there is scant literature on INGOs operating China, which is mostly focused on the INGO

regulation and legalization. In brief, the issue of INGO discursive legitimation on Chinese soil, which shapes the specific genre of this study, is void. This study posits that an ideological dilemma adds to the INGO discursive struggles and a study on its effects will consequently add to the conceptual and empirical dimensions of existing NGO literature.

Research Questions

This article focuses on the discursive legitimation struggles where INGOs strive to prove they are “desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”, and that, simultaneously, aim to overcome the ideological distrust dilemma in a nation of different political values. Hence, a comparative analysis of INGO and Chinese grass-rooted NGO is appropriate. The research questions of this study are:

Q1: What are the discursive strategies used to construct the legitimacy of INGOs on Chinese soil?

Q2: How do these strategies develop at a longitudinal dimension?

Q3: Do INGOs and grass-rooted NGOs differ at their legitimation strategies?

How?

Research Design

Case selection

This article is based on comparing discourse construction of the leading international environmental NGO Greenpeace (GP) and Chinese grass-rooted environmental NGO Friends of Nature (FON) through analyses of “smog” posts on their Weibo accounts from 2012–2018. The reasons are as below: in China, the environmental problems have worsened to a degree that it becomes the main motive of China’s growing social movements⁹; GP and FON are allegedly the most influential INGO and grass-rooted NGO in China (GP has operated in China since 1997; FON was founded and registered in 1994), who share similar mission and core values of “environmental activism” and “social change”¹⁰; they are among the first NGOs to open accounts and start communication practices on Weibo; in China, the smog pollution started to catch wide attention in 2012 and has remained one of China’s most pressing environmental issues ever since. The social constituencies at play in “smog” issues include the wider public, opinion leaders, the corporates, especially those related to coal and fuel industry, the media, the central government and the local government—the central government is relatively active in smog treatment while the local government is more concerned with economic growth. It is a particularly revealing case for the research purposes of this paper.

⁹According to a blue paper released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), environmental issues have become one of 参见 <http://society.people.com.cn/n/2012/1218/c1008-19933666.html>

¹⁰See <http://www.greenpeace.org.cn/about/mission/> and http://www.fon.org.cn/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=6&Itemid=171, search date Feb 2nd, 2018.

Data Collection

The data set of this study consist of 290 posts from GP’s and FON’s official Weibo accounts: 164 posts from GP’s Weibo account “@Greenpeace”(from the period 2012-2018) and 127 posts from FON’s Weibo account “@FriendsofNature” (from the period 2012-2017). All the posts are obtained on Feb 2nd of 2018 by searching on the Weibo platform of the two accounts with the keyword “smog”. This study considers the conduct of reposting smog-related issues by other accounts as an integral part of the data sample based on the presumption that reposting is an alternative way of opinion expression [36]. Overall, the chosen texts comprise a language database of 31 thousand words (Figure 1).

Research Framework

The framework employed in exploring the discourse of INGO is based on Theo van Leeuwen’s proposed discursive categories of legitimation. There are four major categories that include authorization (based on custom, impersonal or personal authority, or expertise), rationalization (based on the utility of institutional action and its cognitive validity in accepted knowledge), moralization (based on norms and specific value systems), and mythopoesis (based on narratives). They are

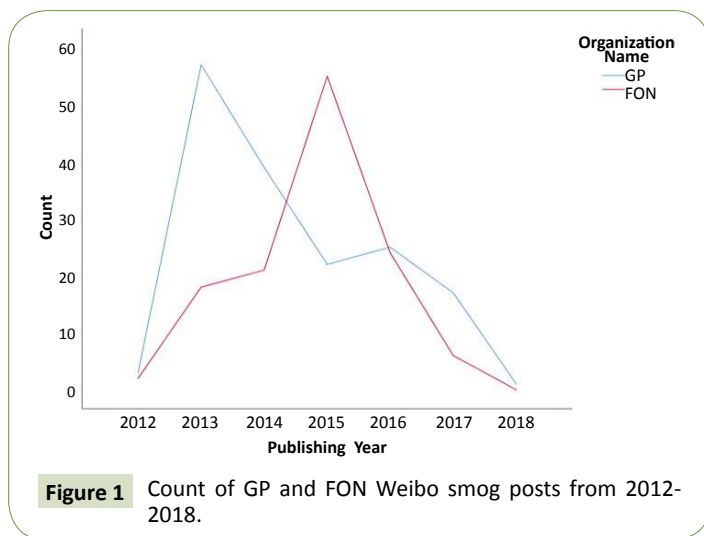


Figure 1 Count of GP and FON Weibo smog posts from 2012-2018.

further divided into sub-strategies and minor categories. The four legitimation categories are further developed and modified for the purpose of this study. A minimal politics strategy is perceived and a major category labeling “de-politicization” and subsequent minor categories are added. Under the major category of authorization, minor categories are re-categorized into grassroots, experts, media and government to match the Chinese context. Also, based on a pilot study, this study proposes the discursive legitimation endeavors by GP and FON are based on minor categories of evaluation and analogy and, to a much lesser extent, of abstraction and theoretical rationalization. The overall structure of the framework and further details including the specific conceptualization is presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

The first phase of the analysis is based on close reading and re-reading of the chosen texts by two trained coders. To test their inter-coder reliability, the Cronbach's alpha is performed based on a randomly chosen sample of 30 posts. As it shows, the inter-coder reliability of the five variables, authorization, moralization, rationalization, mythopoesis and de-politicization are respectively .853, .730, .754, .812, .865., which have reached acceptable levels. Then the analysis pays particular attention to the frequency of the appearance of legitimation categories of different levels at a longitudinal dimension. This is intended to answer the first and second research questions “What are the discursive strategies used to construct the legitimacy of INGOs on Chinese soil?” and “How do these strategies develop at a longitudinal dimension?”. The last stage of the analysis focuses on the differences (if any) between GP and FON on their discursive practices. An independent samples T test is performed to determine the significance of their difference level. The data analysis is performed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

Findings

Authorization strategy provides a central means through which both parties lift their status by investing in widely accepted “authorities”. Moralization and rationalization strategies are more “subtle” and “smart” in that it hides attitudes and values in adjectives, verbs or others that connotes positive or negative

Table 1 The five legitimation categories model.

Major Category	Minor Category	Definition
Authorization	Grassroots	Authority vested in opinion leaders, public intellectuals and role models with moral appeal
	Expert	Authority vested in experts with an institutional status and academic and scientific expertise
	Media	Authority vested in main-stream media that are mostly “propaganda tools”
	Government	Authority vested in laws, policies, governments and government officials
Moralization	Evaluation	Legitimation of positions and practices through the application of evaluative adjectives
	Analogy	Relying on the legitimating or de-legitimizing force of comparisons and contrasts
Rationalization	Instrumental	Focusing on goals as envisaged by people, means and outcomes as something that turned out to exist in hindsight
Mythopoesis	Moral Tales	Narrating rewarding decisions and practices of social actors
	Cautionary Tales	Narrating nonconformist and deviant decisions and practices with undesirable consequences
De-politicization	Avoidance	Avoiding reference to the name of people, places and things and replacing with “somebody”, “some place” or even omission
	Restraint	Lauding before criticizing the policy or government, expressing dissent by reposting and using emoji, claiming problems as global issues that are only shared by China

inclination. Mythopoesis appeals to the SNS users and the wider public by calling on emotional resonance. De-politicization reveals the subtle relationship with the government and the ruling party.

Table 2 present the frequency of the legitimation strategies in GP's and FON's Weibo posts during three time frames: 2012 to 2014, 2015 to 2016 and 2017 to 2018. The year 2014 and 2016 are selected to be division points because 1) In 2014, China tightened the supervision and regulation on SNS, among which Weibo, China's biggest public opinion field, suffered a heavy setback. Many sections were shut down and numerous accounts deleted. It was considered as the end of era of "opinion leaders" and "public intellectuals". The tightened space for "free speech" has also exerted influence to NGO accounts; 2) In 2016, China's Overseas NGO Management Law was heat discussion. It started to take its toll on INGOs operating in China before it officially took effect in January 1st of 2017. A growing political pressure has become the underlying context ever since. In the rest of the section, this study will discuss and interpret the frequencies, the emerging patterns and how they are employed for legitimation purposes in the specific Chinese socio-political context.

A growing use of authorization by GP

There is a significant change in GP's utilization of authorization strategy over time. Between 2012 and 2014, GP's use of authorization strategy accounts for only 8%. Most of the time, GP appears as a "confident" and "professional" environment activist who is active in launching initiatives and proposing changes without the endorsement of the "official". There are occasional citations of grassroots and experts, but an invest in the authority of the media and government is rarely seen. In this time period, the government often appears as an object of criticism:

- Actress Fang Hui performs in Greenpeace micro-film and calls for an acceleration in air pollution precaution and control. (GP, 2013)
- The newly released "2013 Clear Air Action Plan" by Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau is disappointing. (GP, 2013)
- Academician Zhong Nanshan said, "We shall be determined to treat smog!" (GP, 2013)

Beginning with 2015, GP starts to regularly cite the media and government as sources of information. Besides, the blunt criticisms towards the government are rarely seen:

- Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China says the "culprit" of this wave of smog in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region is the illegal emission of

Henan industry. (GP, 2017)

- Starting from this year, Premier Li Keqiang has publicly expressed his determination and measures in smog treatment...which sends a positive signal to smog-related research. (GP, 2017)
- Please join the Smog Agent Plan that is jointly launched by Research Teams of Tsinghua University and Greenpeace. (GP, 2017).

However, though there is an increasing invest in government authority, GP also increases the presence of sources from GP members at the same time, especially those with a certain degree of popularity, including entertainment stars and famous entrepreneurs. This study posits that through such a strategy, GP manages to maintain an "independent" status without appearing too "obedient" to the government.

FON, however, has heavily based the discursive endeavor on authorization in the beginning. FON has a consistent percentage of authorization that is close to 20% through different time phases. This is matching for its status of "grass-rooted NGO" that seeks attention and recognition. What is noticeable is FON's heavy investment in grassroots authority, which accounts for 63% of the total authorization frequency.

This can be partially attributed to FON's positioning of as "the public's voice". By investing in the grassroots rather than the government, FON constructs a detached image that is dedicated to the public good wholeheartedly. By doing so, FON consciously places itself as a dissident and appears more of a radical activist while GP focuses on maintaining a "professional" and "independent" image:

- "We shall stand together to fight the smog, otherwise we will incur huge disaster," said Liang Congjie (founder of FON). (FON, 2012)
- Feng Yongfeng (an acitivist in environmental protection) proposes a wider use of PM 2.5 detectors by the Chinese people. The Environmental monitoring stations of Guangzhou, Wenzhou, Wuhan, Shanghai have equipped their staff with PM 2.5 under their advocacy. (FON, 2014)
- "We are proud to the model family of low carbon. We hope there many others that will follow suite and join the efforts in fighting smog," said Ouyang Xiangping (an ordinary mother). (FON, 2017).

A mixed strategy of moralization and rationalization

Both GP and FON have relied heavily on moralization strategy

Table 2 Frequency of GP and FON's legitimation strategies in numbers and percentages over time.

Legitimation Strategy	2012-2014		2015-2016		2017-2018		Total	
	GP N=490	FON N=241	GP N=306	FON N=373	GP N=108	FON N=23	GP N=904	FON N=637
Authorization	39 (8%)	60 (25%)	36 (12%)	84 (23%)	21 (19%)	4 (17%)	96 (11%)	148 (23%)
Moralization	293 (60%)	115 (48%)	153 (50%)	158 (42%)	42 (39%)	12 (52%)	488 (54%)	285 (45%)
Rationalization	124 (25%)	8 (3%)	66 (22%)	16 (4%)	20 (19%)	0 (0%)	210 (23%)	24 (4%)
Mythopoesis	6 (1%)	15 (6%)	10 (3%)	55 (15%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	19 (2%)	70 (11%)
De-politicization	28 (6%)	43 (18%)	41 (13%)	60 (16%)	18 (16%)	7 (30%)	87 (10%)	110 (17%)

Bold values represent frequency of occurrence ≥20%.

to construct legitimacy through all time phases. But it is noticeable that compared to FON, GP adopts a mixed strategy of moralization and rationalization to strengthen its legal status. This indicates GP's purpose of maintaining "professionalism" while playing down political sensitivity during this process. Through the combined tools of evaluation, analogy and instrumental rationalization, GP focuses on means, goals, and outcomes and make the advocacy it proposes self-evident and morally acceptable. All these emphasize individual responsibility but also subtly points to government inaction and legislative flaws:

- For a successful APEC to be held in Beijing, we support a short-term traffic control; for the sake of the children's health, can we also support a class suspension? Who can grant us a "APEC treat" in heavy-smogged Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region? (GP, 2014)
- The good news is the lasting-for-too-long smog in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region will fade away tomorrow; the bad news is before the regional pollution is completely cured, the smog will definitely return. (GP, 2014)
- Talking of the good air in London, the British government has paid well to get rid of the name of "The City of Fog"; how much are we will to pay to get rid of Beijing's smog? (GP, 2016).

To summarize, GP is effective in using a combined strategy of moralization and rationalization to call up the public's awareness to smog and stimulate the government to act. Especially over the issues of setting up a smog warning system and enacting a new Atmospheric Pollution Prevention Law, GP is able to influence the official and act without creating direct conflicts. FON, on the contrary, relies more on moralization instead of rationalization, a phenomenon that reinforces its image as a radical activist that is opposite to the government:

- The leaders said, "We should be prepared for a protracted war!" Hmmm, is this our smog treatment goal? Why do these officials keep failing us? (FON, 2013)
- To Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China: since the pollution level of smog has advanced, shouldn't we also advance our treatment plans?
- The Wuhan people say there has been incredibly heavy smog in Wuhan for two days. According to local officials, this was due to straw burning, and I believe it was due to outdoor barbecue! LOL. (FON, 2014).

A limited use of mythopoesis

GP appears "reluctant" to use mythopoesis strategy in the beginning, a fact that can be attributed to GP's insisting efforts in forming a "professional" image. Tale telling is believed to "sentimental" in nature and can sometimes damage the authority of story tellers. However, starting from 2015, GP has increased in use of moral and cautionary tales to construct its legitimacy. Two reasons are proposed: first, tales are especially appealing to the wider public; second, tales are effective in user interaction, which means GP can increase its fan base through such a strategy:

- Zhang Lingling is an ordinary mother. A few years ago, her kid was sickened by smog. This made Lingling to quit her job and dedicate to public profit work wholeheartedly. She founded the public profit project Baby Love Blue Sky. She said she felt less guilty towards her daughter whenever she is working. (GP, 2016);
- Ming from a suburban a school fainted during a PE class on a smoggy morning. It is hard to conclude any direct relation with Ming's black out and the smog. But it is fair to say the students are taking classes at the cost of their life on smoggy days. (GP, 2017).

Still, the use of mythopoesis by GP pales (overall 2%) when compared to FON's percentage (overall 11%). While GP reveals a changing attitude towards mythopoesis over time, FON appears as a steadfast believer in the power of tale telling in the very beginning. This again reveals FON's efforts in emotional appeal to "stand with the public". Also, different from GP's heavy reliance on moral tales, FON is also active in employing cautionary tales to construct its legitimacy:

- On Feb 16, a private helicopter crashed after colliding with a resident apartment. Two pilots on the helicopter died. The cause of the tragedy was concluded to be the poor visibility incurred by the smog. (FON, 2013)
- After leaving CCTV, Chai Jing is no longer a reporter, but a mother who wishes good health for her daughter. However, her daughter was born with benign tumor and had to receive a general anesthesia surgery within hours of her birth. Shocked by harms brought by smog, Chai Jing makes this documentary in the hope of calling up more people to act. (FON, 2016).

Truth fights through de-politicization

Through close reading and re-reading of the selected Weibo post, four topics concerning the use of de-politicization emerge:

- 1) The set-up of a regional united defense and control system on coal use;
- 2) The publicity of pollutants information from coal power plants and other industry that release pollutants;
- 3) The set-up of a smog pre-warning system and the publicity of rating standard;
- 4) The enactment of a new environment protection law.

For the first three topics, two constituencies are called into supervision, the enterprises with serious pollution and the local government who cares more on economic growth than environmental protection. For the forth topic, the central government is the main interlocutor. But overall, the government is the main party to appeal to. Different strategies are employed regarding different topics which this study will discuss in details below.

GP employs the avoidance and restraint strategies over all four issues. Instead of pointing directly to the "culprits" of pollutant emission and smog, GP uses general references such "Southeastern Coastal Area of China", "heavy industry", "the

officials of some bureau” instead of precise references. Also, it relies heavily on reposting hard criticisms made by others without making its own comments:

- The mask is not the ultimate solution to smog, but rather, the active movements by those (referring to central government) in protecting the public health and fighting the air pollution is what we expect. (GP, 2013)
- The Southeastern Area has suffered from heavy smog for weeks. It is time to question why they are so slow in the publicity of pollutants information. (GP, 2014)
- The coal power plants in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region are still slow in reducing SO2 emissions. Who grants them the right to be “arrogant”? (GP, 2015).

In contrast, while the avoidance and restraint strategy is frequently used by FON over the issues of the publicity of pollutants information and the enactment of a new environmental protection law-both issues call for a stricter law enforcement and faster legislation by the central government, they are seldom used over issues of regional united defense and control system and smog pre-warning system-both calls for local government action. In brief, FON is cautious in criticizing the central government while blunt in accusing enterprises and local government:

- The policy and measures regarding smog treatment by the Beijing Municipal Government avoid the important and dwell on the trivial. (FON, 2013)
- Beijing traffic officers said whether they are allowed to wear masks is up to the decisions of Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau and Beijing Traffic Management Bureau. (FON, 2015)
- Do you know that the Atmospheric Pollution Prevention Law that is in effect was enacted in 1987! Back then, the word “smog” did not even exist. Can we ask for a new environment protection law? (the central government being default interlocutor) (FON, 2015).

Statistical differences in GP and FON’s discursive strategies

At last, **Tables 3 and 4** presents the independent-samples T test result of the legitimation strategies in GP’s and FON’s Weibo

Legitimation Strategy	Org. Name	Mean	Std. Deviation
Authorization	GP	0.59	0.7
	FON	1.17	0.93
Moralization	GP	2.98	1.457
	FON	2.28	0.604
Rationalization	GP	1.28	0.67
	FON	0.19	0.433
Mythopoesis	GP	0.12	0.34
	FON	0.56	0.515
De-politicization	GP	0.53	0.569
	FON	0.87	0.438

GP (N=164), FON (N=126)

Table 3: Descriptive results of GP and FON’s legitimation strategies.

Table 4: Differences between legitimation strategies by GP and FON (independent-samples T test).

	F	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Authorization	1.354	-5.936	224.735	0
Moralization	68.255	5.019	287	0
Rationalization	45.883	15.893	288	0
Mythopoesis	137.622	-8.743	288	0
De-politicization	65.819	-5.599	288	0
p<.001				

posts. They reveal how GP and FON are differed in discursive strategies at a statistical level.

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviation of discursive strategies employed by GP and FON. Overall, GP relies more on moralization and rationalization whilst FON relies more on authorization, mythopoesis and de-politicization. Combined with the results displayed in **Table 4**, this study finds the differences in discursive strategies by GP and FON have reached significant levels in all five variables: authorization (sig=0.000, p<0.001), moralization (sig=0.000, p<0.001), rationalization (sig=0.000, p<0.001), mythopoesis (sig=0.000, p<0.001) and de-politicization. However, it will be reckless to conclude that GP is more like a radical activist that has a relatively opposite stance against the government, or that FON focuses on grassroots and the wider public with an obedient posture to the government. Again, conclusions can only be made in the contemporary social-political context of China, which this study elaborates below (**Table 4**).

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, GP adopts the major categories of authorization, moralization, rationalization, mythopoesis and de-politicization as legitimation strategies. It starts with a lesser reliance on authorization between 2012 and 2014 (8%), but changes from 2015 when the percentage reaches 12% and climbed to 19% in 2017-2018, a number that exceeds FON by 2%. GP bases its discursive endeavor most heavily on moralization with a consistent percentage of about 40% during each time phase. The moralization strategy is accompanied with rationalization. A mixed strategy of the two is heavily used by GP and the two strategies comprise 78% of the total strategies, whilst such a pattern is not observed in FON. Mythopoesis strategy is only marginally used by GP but the frequency results reveal a growing use of this strategy over time. Finally, an examination of the de-politicization strategy reveals a seemingly ambiguous result. On the one hand, GP’s uses less de-politicization strategy than FON does, which implies that GP is more like a “fearless” activist that dares to challenge the government; on the other hand, a closer examination of the specific minor strategies reveals GP adopts an undifferentiated approach that avoids direct criticisms of the local government and central governments as a whole, while FON appears blunt with the local government and cautions with the central government.

Finally, GP and FON differ in their discursive legitimation strategy use in all five categories.

In summary, this study proposes that GP turns from a “fearless

activist” into a “mild advocate” over the years. This is especially true through a contrast with FON’s legitimization strategies. Besides, GP puts consistent efforts in emphasizing its “independence” through a mixed strategy of moralization and rationalization and has slowly learned to appeal to the wider public by an increasing use of mythopoesis.

This article attempts to fill the void of the discursive research on INGO in China.

Also, this study adds to the conceptual and empirical dimensions of the four legitimization strategies by Theo van Leeuwen and proves the applicability of the fifth major category “de-politicization” and subsequent minor categories of “avoidance”

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