

From Nature Protection to Environmental Protection: Chinese Environmentalism in the Long 1970s (Extended Abstract)

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In 1979, China promulgated its first Environmental Protection Law as part of the Four Modernizations.¹ Between 1979 and 1988, the Chinese government promoted a series of environmental protection laws, including the Marine Environment Protection Law (1984) and the Wildlife Protection Law (1988).² These new laws combined a diverse array of natural protection measures that had been governed by separate, and often mutually exclusive, regulations. The laws placed some of these measures, including the conservation of soil and water, policies to prevent deforestation of forests and steppes, and protection of wildlife, under the umbrella term “environmental protection” (*huanjing baohu*).³ When the Environmental Protection Law was promulgated, the term “environmental protection” (*huanjing baohu*, or abbreviated as *huanbao*) had already replaced the term “nature protection” (*ziran baohu*) in both government documents and scientific discourse regarding conservation. What exactly did it mean to protect the “environment” rather than “nature”? This paper aims to trace the emergence of the term “environmental protection” in the 1970s and analyze the subtle differences between the two terms.

In the early 1970s, the concept “environmental protection” began to emerge, eventually supplanting the term “nature protection” that was used in the 1950s and 1960s. In China, the concept of “environmental protection” had an inseparable relation to “environmental pollution” (*huanjing wuran*). Pollution was increasingly discussed both internationally and domestically in the early 1970s, with domestic discussions warning Chinese people that a polluted environment could make humans ill and kill them. Such a frightening vision changed the ways in which Chinese people perceived the relationships humans made with the surrounding natural environment. In this context, environmental protection emerged as an antidote to environmental pollution that could save Chinese people from the disasters caused by environmental destruction.⁴

There were both internal and external forces behind the emergence of environmental protection in China during the 1970s. Chinese scientists paid close attention to international attention to pollution, especially in capitalist nations. For Chinese scientists, pollution problems in the First World presented a horrifying future, while their protection measures provided models to follow. On the one hand, the global discussion on pollution motivated Chinese scholars to promote environmental protection to prevent pollution as soon as possible.⁵ The destructive

¹ Jin Jianming and Zheng Weizhen, “Baohu Ziran Huanjing He Ziran Ziyuan - Xuexi Huanjing Baohufa de Tihui” (Protect Natural Environment and Natural Resources - Understanding of the Environmental Protection Law), *Environmental Protection*, no. 02 (1980): 13. It was under science.

² Stefanie Beyer, “Environmental Law and Policy in the People’s Republic of China,” *Chinese Journal of International Law* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 185–211, <https://doi.org/10.1093/chinesejil/jmk002>.

³ “Zhonghe Renmin Gongheguo Huanjing Baohufa (Shixing)” (The Environmental Protection Law of the People’s Republic of China (Trial)), *Environmental Protection*, no. 05 (1979): 1–4.

⁴ On the relations between pollution and environmental protection, see Abigail R. Jahiel, “The Organization of Environmental Protection in China,” *The China Quarterly* 156 (December 1998): 757–87.

⁵ Chinese scientists who began to discuss environmental protection, environmental pollution, and environmental science during the period repeatedly mentioned the water, soil, and air pollution problems from which the capitalist

consequences of pollution in capitalist nations showed a grim and pessimistic future that China should avoid.⁶ On the other hand, global measures to prevent pollution inspired Chinese scientists to envision environmental protection policies. For instance, when Tu Guangchi introduced environmental science as a new discipline in 1973, he highlighted the international efforts to protect the environment by stating that, between 1970 and 1971, the governments of Britain (1970), the United States (1970), Canada (1971), and Japan (1971) had already established environmental departments.⁷ He further noted that new measures for environmental protection in China followed the models of these nations. For instance, he pointed out that “environmental monitoring sites” (*Huanjing jiance wangzhan*) established in 1970 followed the quality measurements developed in the United States, Britain, France, and Japan.⁸

In the early 1970s, China also participated in the global policymaking of environmental protection. In 1972, China joined the international discussions on environmental protection by attending the UN Stockholm Conference. At the conference, representatives formed a global consensus on how to deal with the human impact on the environment and how to best preserve the environment.⁹ The Stockholm Declaration, which placed a significant emphasis on the prevention of environmental harms, became the basis of international environmental law-making.¹⁰ It also became the basis of China’s new environmental protection law in 1978.¹¹

The internal force behind the emergence of environmental protection discourse was the environmental destruction and pollution from which Chinese people also suffered. During the 1970s, water and air pollution in China was a serious concern for the Chinese government.¹² In 1973, China established the National Environmental Protection Bureau to resolve environmental issues.¹³ In the same year, in order to protect Beijing - the most important city of China - from pollution, the Municipal Party Committee of Beijing hosted its first environmental protection project meeting.¹⁴ The party committee requested scientists to publish the journal *Environmental Protection* (*huanjing baohu*) in order to propagate the importance of environmental protection.¹⁵

The growing awareness that humans could suffer severe harm from the organic and

nations suffered See for instance, “Qianyan” (Forward), *Environmental Protection*, no. 01 (1973): 2; Liu Dongsheng, “Huanjing Wuran Yu Huanjing Baohu” (Environmental Pollution and Protection), *Environmental Protection*, no. 01 (1973): 21–27; Fang Xin, “Jingji Fazhan He Huanjing Baohu” (Economic Development and Environmental Protection), *Environmental Protection*, no. 03 (1973): 5.

⁶ Beijing linxueyuan (Beijing Academy of forestry science), “Linmu Yu Huanjing Baohu” (Forests and Environmental Protection), *Journal of Hebei Forestry Science and Technology*, no. 03 (1973): 1–19.

⁷ Tu Guangchi, “Guanyu Huanjing Kexue” (On Environmental Science), *Environmental Protection*, no. 01 (1973): 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eric Paglia, “The Swedish Initiative and the 1972 Stockholm Conference: The Decisive Role of Science Diplomacy in the Emergence of Global Environmental Governance,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (December 2021): 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Stefanie Beyer, “Environmental Law and Policy in the People’s Republic of China,” *Chinese Journal of International Law* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 185–211.

¹² Wang Jusi, “Water Pollution and Water Shortage Problems in China,” *The Journal of Applied Ecology* 26, no. 3 (December 1989): 851.

¹³ Ibid, 854.

¹⁴ “Qianyan,” 2.

¹⁵ The first issue was published in 1973.

inorganic substances surrounding them inspired Chinese scientists to further study the complicated relations of organisms in an ecosystem. In the early 1970s, scientists began to discuss how to maintain the balance of an ecosystem. Sustaining “ecological balance” (*shengtai pingheng*) was considered a crucial part of environmental protection. In 1973, for instance, Liu Dongsheng wrote:

“During the long development of nature, many organisms work together to maintain ecological balance. These include humans, as well as animals, plants, and other microorganisms that surround us. [Within this balance], humans acquire energy through eating animals and plants, while animals eat plants. Likewise, plants get nutrients from the soil, absorb oxygen and carbon dioxide from the air, and receive solar energy. When animals and plants die, various elements [that constituted them] return to the soil. Subsequently, a new plant might absorb them. Humans are accustomed to the diverse elements that already exist in nature because humans evolved within the same environment. If a new type of chemical suddenly appears, it will quickly be absorbed into the food chain discussed above and infiltrate the human body. [...] Likewise, pollutants could kill plants and animals, leading to the destruction of the balance of the whole ecosystem. Since the ecosystem is a huge and complicated system, tightly interlinked, once the ecosystem is destroyed it would be highly difficult to restore it.”¹⁶

Compared to the incipient definition of the ecosystem that vaguely alluded to the connectivity of flora and fauna (discussed in Chapter 3), Liu’s concept of ecosystem certainly provided a more complicated understanding of how diverse elements in the environment interacted and circulated within an ecosystem. By placing humans in the ecosystem, Liu also underscored the urgency of protecting the environment in order to save human beings.

All these crucial changes made during the later half of the Cultural Revolution were encased in a strong political rhetoric of Maoism. Even though Chinese environmental science and conservation measures during the long 1970s received influence from the capitalist nations, many sources claimed that, due to the fundamental characteristics of capitalism to seek economic profit, capitalist nations would not be able to resolve environmental pollution issues.¹⁷ In order to prove the superiority of socialism, these scientists often cited Mao’s quotes, some of which did not seem to be directly linked to environmental protection, to justify a Chinese way of environmental protection. For instance, the foreword to the first issue of *Environmental Protection* cited Mao’s saying “Serving the public is our responsibility” to create an environmental protection slogan that read “rely on the public, everyone sets out to work, environmental protection benefits the people.”¹⁸ In his article published in *People’s Daily* (1973), Fang Xin claimed that protecting and improving the condition of the environment is an important path towards socialism by citing Mao’s statement that “socialism should not only liberate workers or the means of production but also liberate the vast natural world exploited by the old society.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Liu Dongsheng, 25.

¹⁷ “Qianyan,” 2; Liu Dongsheng, 3.

¹⁸ “Qianyan,” 2.

¹⁹ Fang Xin, 5.

After 1978, the political rhetoric of Maoism was not evident in the discussion of environmental protection. References to the ideological tensions between capitalism and socialism also decreased in the discussion of environmental protection. Nevertheless, the concern for pollution became one of the most crucial parts of the Environmental Protection Law (1979). Twenty-five out of thirty-three clauses of the new law considered pollution. It detailed measures to prevent air, water, and soil pollution.²⁰ The enhanced understanding of the complexities in the ecosystem also continued after 1978. In 1978, for instance, Ma Shijun explained that studying the “environment” meant to “study the synthetic actions made by the diverse elements constituting a certain place.”²¹ He also highlighted the connectivity of animals, plants, and microorganisms creating a web of ecosystem.²² Sustaining ecological balance continuously became an important topic of environmental protection among scientists as well.²³

In conclusion, several significant changes in Chinese perception of nature and the red-crowned cranes occurred in the long 1970s. These included the fear of pollution, the emergence of environmental protection ideology, the institutionalization of environmental protection enforcement, the enhanced understanding of the ecosystem, and the rise of panda diplomacy. The transition from nature protection to environmental protection throughout the 1970s re-situated humans in the complex web of the ecosystem surrounding them.

²⁰ “Zhonghe Renmin Gongheguo Huanjing Baohufa (Shkxing),” 1–4.

²¹ Ma Shijun, “Huanjing Baohu Yu Shengtai Xitong” (Environmental Protection and Ecosystem), *Environmental Protection*, no. 02 (1978): 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 9–11.

²³ See for instance Ma Shijun, 42–46; Li Xianfa, “Guowai Huanjing Baohu Hyanjiu Dongxiang” (International Environmental Protection Research Trend), *Environmental Protection*, no. 03 (1978): 12–16.