Research on Environmental Justice in China: Limitations and Possibilities

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1 Introduction

This note focuses on current sociological research being conducted in China on the concept of environmental justice.\(^1\) It critically reviews how the concept has been used in the Chinese context since the 1990s, evaluating some of its possibilities and limitations. We argue that environmental justice is a useful concept in the context of China, due to its resonance with environmental concepts and axes of social mobilization (particularly in relation to procedural justice and law), its capacity to address social as well as environmental issues of structural inequality together, and its resonance with shared ideas of social justice within Chinese legal traditions.\(^2\) However, the concept of environmental justice also has clear limitations. Practically, environmental justice has been used predominantly in the academic sphere in China, with very little take-up in civil society discussions about the environment.

Conceptually, the broad and wide-ranging use of environmental justice in diverse academic research could effectively diffuse the critical capacity of the concept. We contend that attention to questions of environmental injustice, alongside justice, is particularly important for researching environmental (in)justice in China.

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\(^1\) For brief details about the project see Annex, below.

We conclude by discussing some preliminary research findings from an empirical case study of environmental (in)justice in Nanjing.

2 The Concept of Environmental Justice in China

Environmental justice has its roots in the 1980s United States, when environmental and civil rights activists drew attention to the disproportionate siting of toxic hazards in ethnic minority and low-income communities. In China, as elsewhere in the world, poor and disadvantaged people face the heaviest burdens of toxic pollution. The unequal social and geographical distribution of environmental benefits and hazards is a core problem of environmental (in)justice. Since the late 1990s, researchers in China have written about the applicability of environmental justice in the Chinese context. This interdisciplinary scholarship echoes similar efforts to extend the concept of environmental justice in relation to other countries around the world, particularly in the global South. Yet despite receiving increasing academic attention, the concept of environmental justice has not yet become popular within environmental policy or civil society in China. With its western origins, our research prompts us to ask: what is the salience of the concept of environmental justice in China today?

Our review of environmental justice literature in China is based on a systematic search of articles in the China Academic Journals (CNKi) database, in addition to a selection of English-language articles by Chinese researchers. A CNKi search shows that since the late 1990s, there have been around 250 articles that have ‘environmental justice’ in their titles, and more than 600 articles that have ‘environmental justice’ in their key words. Our approach contrasts

3 See Robert D. BULLARD and Beverly WRIGHT, Race, Place, and Environmental Justice after Hurricane Katrina, Westview Press, 2009; Dorceta E. TAYLOR Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility NYU Press, 2014.
4 From a range of disciplines including environmental ethics, environmental law, sociology, and other social sciences, including articles published in either Chinese or English.
6 The CNKi literature review for environmental justice in China was conducted by searching ‘环境正义 huanjing zhengyi’ or ‘环境公正 huanjing gongzheng’ or ‘环境公平 huanjing gongfa’ or ‘环境平等 huanjing pingding’.