Research Article

The Influence of Chinese Grassroots Environmental NGOs on Government Decision-Making: Based on Social Internet of Things in Two Ant-Dam Movements

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Whether Chinese grassroots environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOs) have played a significant role in Chinese environmental decision-making remains a subject of debate. Like companies, ENGOs seek ways to apply social internet of things to deliver quality services in increasingly complex environments, enhance capabilities, engage partners, and thereby influence governments. This research reanalyzes two ant-dam movements in Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces to assess which strategies ENGOs deploy, how they exert their influence, and to what extent they have influenced Chinese environmental decision-making. We identify three strategies adopted in the two cases. The first is a bottom-up (public) strategy that involves mobilizing the media and celebrities to exert public opinion pressure on the Chinese government. The second is a top-down (international) strategy that involves gaining the sympathy and support of the international community to exert international pressure on the government. The third is a flank-attack (political) strategy that involves winning over deputies of the Chinese NPC and CPPCC and members of Chinese democratic parties to exert political pressure on the government. However, all of the pressure exerted only catalyzes and accelerates the process of Chinese environmental decision-making: Its influence is secondary and represents an external cause. The will and determination of the central and local governments are the leading factor and represent the internal determinant of environmental decision-making.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, China has witnessed an economic miracle and rapid GDP growth. In addition to these extraordinary achievements, China has been confronted with environmental challenges. With the deterioration of China’s environmental situation, an increasing number of people have been concerned about environmental protection. Since the first grassroots environmental nongovernmental organization (ENGO), Friends of Nature, was established in China in 1994, China has seen increasing numbers of organizations of this kind involving themselves in Chinese environmental issues. Recognizing the strength of and necessity for ENGOs and considering China’s increasing environmental degradation, the Chinese government has cautiously welcomed ENGOs to play a larger role in mitigating environmental deterioration [1]. Indeed, the Chinese government itself has set up many ENGOs; these now account for the majority of Chinese ENGOs. At the same time, because of the increasing awareness of environmental problems among ordinary people, grassroots ENGOs have also emerged, inspired by the achievements made by Friends of Nature and other similar nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) [2]. Compared to government-organized ENGOs, which have close ties with the government and more opportunities to participate in the policy-making process [3], grassroots ENGOs, which are usually established by individuals in a bottom-up manner and operate in rural areas or small cities, are relatively independent and autonomous and usually keep a cautious distance from the government and lack communication channels with the state.

As ENGOs have become an important factor in environmental governance, there has been a considerable amount of research on them. However, only a few studies discuss the
influence of Chinese grassroots ENGOs on environmental decision-making. There are some studies related to Chinese grassroots ENGOs in Western academia, but these studies concentrate more on the development of these ENGOs [4, 5], their political influence [6, 7], their legal situation [8], the influence of the internet on them [9], or their comparative influence relative to that of international NGOs [10]. Regarding Chinese research, due to the sensitivity of this topic, most scholars focus on the development situation of grassroots ENGOs [1, 11] or their participation in environmental litigation [12–14]. Few articles study the influence of grassroots ENGOs on decision-making. In recent decades, especially since 2000, the number of Chinese grassroots ENGOs has increased dramatically. Considering the enormous number of these organizations, they should have considerable potential to push China to improve its environmental governance and performance. Thus, this study asks the following questions: Have Chinese grassroots ENGOs exerted an influence on Chinese environmental decision-making, and if so, what are the strategies or channels through which they have been capable of doing so? To what extent have they exerted an influence on policy-making in China? Furthermore, regarding the strategies employed, what are their channels and paths? Why have ENGOs adopted these strategies? Do they prefer a particular strategy and why? What is the real role that they have played in policy-making, and to what extent have they impacted it?

To answer these questions, this research centers on the practices and participation of grassroots ENGOs, using the method of case analysis and focusing on how these organizations have exerted pressure on and contributed to governmental decision-making. Therefore, the article proceeds as follows. The first section offers definitions of the relative concepts and a literature review and then introduces the selected cases. Subsequently, the article examines the whole process of behavior and interaction between the grassroots ENGOs, the government, and other forces in the cases, analyzing which strategies and paths they have adopted to affect government decision-making in this process and their real role in and impact on policy-making. We conclude by summarizing our findings and discussing future possible research.

2. Definition

2.1. NGOs and Grassroots ENGOs. An NGO is usually regarded as a not-for-profit group that is principally independent from the government and organized on a local, national, or international level to address issues in support of the public good [15]. In China, the official term for NGOs is shehui tuanti, which literally means social groups. There are many organizations that are organized and funded by the government but registered as shehui tuanti. In China, this kind of organization also plays the role and has the functions of an NGO. Here, grassroots ENGOs (caogen huanbao zuzhi) refer only to social groups that focus on environmental protection and are registered by Chinese individuals or private organizations, not by the state, state-owned enterprises or any other official group. This study focuses mainly on the behavior of registered grassroots ENGOs, as they can legally interact with governments. In terms of unsanctioned grassroots ENGOs, the treatment of the Chinese government toward them is usually based on the principles of no contact, no recognition, and no ban [2]. Therefore, unlike for registered grassroots ENGOs, it is difficult to find relevant information and data on unregistered ENGOs to analyze their influence on Chinese environmental decision-making.

3. Influence

Gamson elaborates that influence happens when one’s actions are changed because of another’s intentional information provision and persuasion [16]. That is, through communication, the mind and actions of the former are changed by the efforts of the latter. Knocke posits that when one receives, decodes, interprets, and reacts to the intentional information of others, influence occurs [17]. Based on these explanations, in this study, influence refers to one’s capacity to change the behaviors and mind of another through communication or other sources.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Strategies Applied by Grassroots ENGOs. Unlike ENGOs in developed countries, Chinese grassroots ENGOs have rarely been engaged in negotiations related to decision-making or large-scale social movements [18]. Because they are confined to specific areas, Chinese grassroots ENGOs have focused their actions mainly on nature conservation, environmental education, energy conservation, and policy advocacy [19, 20]. The majority take a nonconfrontational stance toward the government and avoid becoming involved in certain environmental issues related to politics [21, 22]. Indeed, they practice self-censorship and self-containment, and they avoid launching campaigns that could pit them against the government [23].

During the 1990s, the main approach of most Chinese grassroots ENGOs was to organize individuals directly to perform tree planting and garbage collection [24]. Since the early 2000s, some grassroots ENGOs have changed their strategies to engage in environmental movements by working with the media, launching campaigns, utilizing environmental litigation, or petitioning the government. Among these strategies, forming a coalition with the media has been the most effective and influential. At the same time, grassroots ENGOs have also resorted to other informal channels and personal relationships with officials to intervene on their behalf [25].

In general, among these entities, the media are the most supportive of environmental actions. Although environmental issues are usually related to politics, most of them are irrelevant to the central government, which advocates for sustainable development. Therefore, for larger media, reporting on these issues is politically and morally right and can attract more readers. In fact, many grassroots ENGO leaders have backgrounds as journalists or have been engaged in media activities [26]. For example, LiHong Shi, a former China Daily journalist, set up the Green Plateau; Zhang Kejiang, a journalist at China Youth Daily, founded
Green Island; and Wang Yongchen, a journalist of the China Central Radio Station, cofounded Green Earth Volunteers. For this reason, grassroots ENGOs have found a close ally in the media in China [27].

With the development of the internet in China, grassroots ENGOs have also improved the green public sphere through online discussion and by releasing information. In doing so, they have formed loose cooperation with internet users through internet hyperlinks, a practice that has also played a significant role in Chinese environmental movements [28]. Some Internet social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Renren, have dramatically helped ENGOs make contact with people online, release information, shape the virtual community, and even shape public opinion [29].

In 2014, China revised its environmental protection law and established an environmental public interest litigation system that allows specific ENGOs to file lawsuits to combat environmental pollution or ecological damage and to safeguard the environmental interests of the public. Therefore, some local ENGOs have pursued environmental litigation, inspired by their knowledge of the experience of international NGOs. However, the high threshold and narrow scope of plaintiff qualification have affected the development of environmental litigation to a certain extent. Additionally, the litigation system has not functioned effectively, as the design of the system is incomplete: Hearing and adjudication are uncertain and rely heavily on the activism of the courts. Therefore, many ENGOs have chosen to target government decision-making through supervisory units more frequently than through the legislature or the judiciary [20, 30].

4.2. Influence Exerted by Grassroots ENGOs. The influence of grassroots ENGOs on Chinese environmental decision-making is a topic of debate. Thus far, scholars have held different views. Unlike environmental movements in Southeast Asia, where environmental activities have changed the environmental policies of governments and the mode of governance and even induced political reforms, the movements in China have been dominated by government rules and have been more interested in raising environmental awareness than in pushing for reforms or political changes [31, 32]. As Johnson states, in the specific political context, Chinese grassroots ENGOs usually show no hint of opposition to the government [33]. They try to become involved in any environmental movements that do not cross this line, especially when there is a confrontation between economic development and environmental protection. This kind of pessimistic view is shared by Economy and other scholars [34–36]. They believe that Chinese local governments prioritize economic development, which is correlated with environmental issues. For this reason, to survive, most grassroots ENGOs are less likely to assume the same role as their counterparts in Southeast Asia; that is, they cannot serve as a channel for bringing about broader changes in China.

In an article released one year later, however, Economy and her colleagues offer a contrasting perspective on the influence of Chinese grassroots ENGOs [36]. They claim that Chinese ENGOs have indeed had a noticeable impact, based on a few cases of cooperation between some ENGOs (including several grassroots ENGOs) and the State Environmental Protection Administration of China (SEPA). However, they fail to notice that such cooperation took place with the permission of the government, which the government gave not because it was forced to do so under pressure exerted by ENGOs but because it intended to carry out some reforms. Yang (2005) also contends that movements of grassroots ENGOs have even induced Chinese democratic change to some extent; however, this democratic change is not clearly demonstrated in his article.

In Western countries, the influence of the media on public perceptions of environmental issues is powerful, and journalism has shaped decisions in environmental science and decision-making. In China, it is difficult to distinguish who actually exerts influence when grassroots ENGOs work closely with the media. In the early 2000s, several cases were initiated by grassroots ENGOs founded by journalists. For example, in the cases of stopping the hydropower stations on the Nu River and in Duijiangyan (an ancient irrigation system that has been designated a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site), the founders of two grassroots ENGOs first reported on these cases under their identity as journalists. Their reports generated publicity about the two projects, which was crucial in the victory of these environmental campaigns. Burgh and Zeng also point out that it is difficult to account for the extent to which the media have an effect on decision-making [37].

However, some studies are quite positive about the influence of grassroots ENGOs. Most of their confidence comes from several successful environmental campaigns initiated by grassroots ENGOs in the early 2000s [33]. By far, the most significant cases are those of ENGOs opposing hydropower development in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, where in 2003, two grassroots ENGOs and the media launched a public campaign against planned dam projects near Duijiangyan and the Nu River, which were cancelled and halted by the government. These campaigns are regarded as the most prominent environmental movements in China and as a watershed in Chinese environmentalism, and they are referred to as a symbol of the auspicious future of grassroots ENGOs. Studying several antihydropower cases involving grassroots ENGOs, Mertha argues that environmental civil organizations can make use of the gap in China’s fragmented political system and, in turn, influence government policy [38]. Büsgen states that grassroots ENGOs have become an important force for promoting an alternative view in China [39]. Lu, however, is cautious about this perception, as she notices that the influence of certain local officials is also relevant to the success of these two cases [40].

Pien believes that although there was reinforced control over civil society in China, grassroots ENGOs still played crucial roles in local environmental governance [10]. As grassroots ENGOs have kinship ties with diverse local actors, they know how to mobilize residents and relevant resources. Therefore, they directly and indirectly contribute to local decision-making and implementation. However,
his study does not provide detailed information about how ENGOs exert their influence on local environmental governance. Farid describes how grassroots NGOs exert their influence on local government but only in regard to small NGOs at a local level [41, 42].

Therefore, it is still an unsettled question in academia whether and how grassroots ENGOs have influenced Chinese environmental decision-making. This research uses a case study approach to analyze this question, including how they exert their influence and to what extent they influence the decision-making process.

5. Case Selection

This study selects the Dujiangyan and Nu River ant-dam environmental movements in Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces as case studies. The main reason for this choice is as follows. These two ant-dam movements initiated by grassroots ENGOs have gained highly significant attention and unprecedented success in the history of Chinese ENGOs. Therefore, most positive views of the influence of grassroots ENGOs are based on these cases [26, 28, 43, 44]. At the same time, the two cases have triggered some doubts about the real influence of grassroots ENGOs [40]. All of these positive or negative conclusions are debatable, as they were premised on the incomplete information available at the time that they were made. Now, more than ten years have passed, and much more new information and many more new background materials have been released and revealed, offering researchers a broader scope and deeper perspective on these events. Therefore, it is possible and necessary for researchers to reassess and reanalyze the real influence of grassroots ENGOs on these two cases by taking a retrospective view of the whole process.

6. Findings and Discussion

Among all NGOs, ENGOs have been the most dynamic civil organizations in China since 2000. Some grassroots ENGOs have appeared to be particularly well organized and adept at mobilizing public support, as proven by the success of some environmental movements initiated by such organizations. Among such movements, two ant-dam movements initiated by two grassroots ENGOs are especially high-profile cases. In the first case, in 2003, the grassroots ENGOs mobilized public opinion against the Yangliuhu dam in Dujiangyan; in the second case, in 2003 and 2004, the grassroots ENGOs fought against dams planned on the Nu River. These two movements made a significant impression in China.

6.1. The Efforts Made by Grassroots ENGOs. In 2003, Sichuan intended to build a dam on the Yangliuhu, only 1350 meters away from the core area of the ancient Dujiangyan irrigation system. After learning this news, the founders of two grassroots ENGOs, Zhang Kejiang of Green Island and Wang Yongchen of Green Home, went to Dujiangyan and then reported on this story on social media. With the development of social internet of things, Chinese grassroots ENGOs have witnessed a great chance since 2000. That is, computers, laptops, and other communication devices are connecting people directly through different applications, like Facebook, WeChat, and other social network applications [45]. Social Internet of things has become a new way for them to engage in social mobilization and environmental advocacy [46]. These two grassroots ENGOs, Green Island and Green Home, used their official website to release this information and launched the ant-dam issue on a web forum, encouraging the public to exchange and discuss opinions there. At the same time, they also released the news and guided the topics through the Tianya forum, BBS, BlogChina, Sina forum, and other forums [47].

After Zhang’s article criticizing the plan to construct the dam on Yangliuhu near Dujiangyan was published, other media reports were soon triggered. Due to the mobilization undertaken by Green Island and Green Home, more than 180 Chinese media outlets became involved in this movement and intensively reported on the Yangliuhu project. Among them, more than a dozen mainstream websites released the news, generating a spike in web traffic and sparking heated discussion in the forums. Thus, public attention was captured, and the public showed great concern over the project. The outcry against the construction of the Yangliuhu dam was unprecedented.

Zhang also conveyed this information to the UNESCO office in Beijing. In turn, a cultural officer with the UNESCO office, Moukala Ngouemo Edmond, conducted an inquiry into the issue with China’s National Commission for UNESCO and the Ministry of Construction.

Regarding the plan to build dams on the Nu River, which is part of the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage Site, the same set of events occurred. On 12 August 2003, China’s National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) approved a plan for thirteen levels of hydropower exploitation on the Nu River. Wang Yongchen and Zhang Kejiang once again became the central figures of the movement to stop construction. Wang reported on the project and mobilized other journalists to also report on it and repeated the actions taken against the Yangliuhu dam, initiating ant-dam discussions on protecting the Nujiang River in network forums [47]. Wang later organized a photography exhibition on the Nu River to raise public attention and collected the signatures of 62 celebrities from the art, science, and media sectors to support the movement.

In November 2003, the Third US–China Environment Forum was held in Beijing, and many grassroots ENGOs attended, including Green Home, Green Island, Global Village, and Friends of Nature. Due to the efforts made by Green Home and other grassroots ENGOs, the last topic on the forum agenda was how to protect the Nu River from hydropower exploitation. At the end of November, the World Rivers and People’s Ant-Dam Conference was held in Thailand. Some Chinese grassroots ENGOs, including Green Home, Green Island, Friends of Nature, and Yunnan Green Watershed, attended the conference. At this meeting, Chinese grassroots ENGOs lobbied on many occasions and mobilized NGOs from 60 countries to sign a petition to protect the Nu River, and they sent the petition to UNESCO, which later replied that it would pay attention to the Nu
River. Half a year later, during the fifth United Nations Civil Society Forum held in Korea, a representative from Green Home gave a speech specifically about the Nu River. At this forum, representatives from various countries signed a petition to support protecting the Nu River. All of these actions performed by grassroots ENGOs exerted pressure on relevant Chinese departments and local governments.

Meanwhile, some grassroots ENGOs also actively contacted officials of relevant organizations to encourage and help them fight for the Nu River. With the help of Green Home, Shen Xiaohui, a senior engineer in the National Forest Department, drafted two proposals that were finally submitted to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC) National Committee and the National People’s Congress (NPC). In these two proposals, Shen suggested vetoing the hydropower plans for the Nu River. Meanwhile, with the courage and help of Green Watershed, a grassroots ENGO based in Yunnan, Dai Kang, a member of the CPPCC Yunnan Provincial Committee and vice chairman of the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the Chinese Democratic League, raised questions about the development of the Nu River while speaking on behalf of his party at the second session of the Ninth CPPCC Yunnan Provincial Committee and pointed out that hydropower construction on the Nu River would have a great negative impact on the Nu River Basin.

6.2. Other Factors Involved in the Two Cases. Wang Yongchen and Zhang Kejian learned about these two projects upon being informed about them by government officials. Regarding the Dujiangyan Yangliuhu project, the first person to learn of the plan in early June 2003, the director of the Office of the Dujiangyan World Heritage Site, Deng Chongzhu, invited Zhang Kejian and Wang Yongchen to visit and write reports about the planned dam. At the same time, he reported the news to a party secretary in Dujiangyan County. The party secretary paid great attention to the information and called for a meeting of the standing committee. The meeting soon reached the consensus that Dujiangyan County objected to the project. The county people’s congress, the government, and the county people’s political consultative conference welcomed this decision and reported it to their higher-level units, the Chengdu People’s Congress, Chengdu government, and Chengdu CPPCC. Meanwhile, the Dujiangyan Construction Department, Culture Relic Department, and Forestry Department also provided reports to their higher-level units. Immediately, the Dujiangyan People’s Congress wrote an urgent letter to the Sichuan Province People’s Congress, stating, “We cannot sacrifice two thousand and five hundred years of Chinese civilization to build a dam that could be built on any river,” and petitioned the congress to support the objection. Soon thereafter, in July, the congress replied that it would conduct a survey about the project.

On 1 August 2003, the party secretary of the Chengdu Communist Party of China (CPC) and the mayor of the Chengdu municipal government reported on this project in person to the party secretary of the Sichuan CPC, and they stated their strong objections to the project. On the same day, an investigation team led by an official from the Ministry of Construction with other members of the National Culture Heritage Administration and Chinese UNESCO Commission visited Dujiangyan and pointed out that the project should not be constructed before it received official approval. Some experts from the Chinese Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Environmental Protection (CEPM), Ministry of Education, and National Culture Heritage Administration also objected. At the Sixteenth Sichuan CPC Standing Committee Meeting on 29 August, the governor of the Sichuan government declared the government’s decision to object to this project. He stated that “the provincial government has reached a consensus to not allow the construction of this project.”

Regarding the Nu River case, the government officials also played an important role. On 26 August 2003, the NDRC held the Nu River Hydropower Planning Report Review Meeting in Beijing. This meeting approved the plan for the construction of 13 levels of hydropower stations on the Nu River even though no environmental impact assessment had been conducted for the project. An official from the CEPM who was attending this meeting refused to sign the paper and give approval. He asserted that it was not in line with the Law of Environmental Impact Assessment, which would go into effect in the next five days. He called Wang Yongchen, the leader of Green Home, to tell her about the project and asked her to find experts familiar with the Nu River, as he wanted to fight to protect the river.

Eight days later, the CEPM held the Expert Forum of Nu River Hydropower Development Activities in Ecological and Environmental Protection, where strong objections were made by experts introduced by Wang Yongchen. More than ten members of the media joined the forum based on the recommendation of Wang Yongchen, and they soon reported on the project. Later, the CEPM held another expert meeting in Yunnan about the Nu River hydropower project and conducted a series of ecological studies and surveys of the Nu River Basin.

Later, premier Wen Jiabao gave instructions on the hydropower planning report on the Nu River submitted by the NDRC to the State Council: “For such large-scale hydropower projects that attract great social attention and for which there are different opinions regarding environmental protection, careful research and scientific decision-making should be applied.” As a result, the government called a halt to the construction of the Nu River hydropower project.

6.3. Following up on the Two Dams. Engineering demonstration work on the Dujiangyan Yangliuhu hydropower project was halted immediately when the project was unanimously objected to by the Standing Committee of the Dujiangyan County CPC. After the provincial government declared its objection at the Sixteenth Sichuan CPC Standing Committee Meeting, the project was officially stopped. While drafting this paper, the researcher asked a Dujiangyan official about the dam, and he confirmed that there had been no dam construction at Yangliuhu since 2003. In dealing with the relationship between protection and development, the Sichuan government chose protection.
However, the Nu River project experienced a tortuous process before it was stopped. The project was suspended on the instructions of Premier Wen in 2004. In that year, Chinese and Western academia regarded this event as a victory for Chinese grassroots ENGOs and as a watershed in Chinese environmentalism. However, this optimistic conclusion was dashed by the establishment of a corporation (the Liuku Hydropower Station Construction Branch of Yunnan Huadian Nu River Hydropower Development Co., Ltd. (Huadian Group)) in 2008 that was responsible for the construction, operation, and management of the hydropower resource development of the sixth reservoir in the main stream of the Nu River. Additionally, in 2008, without the approval of the state, preliminary work on the Nu River hydropower station quietly started, and upstream villages were resettled in the name of building a new socialist countryside. Two years later, the Research Report on the Development of the Nu River, issued by the Nu River prefecture-level government to the NDRC, clearly stated that it was hoped that the state would approve the hydropower priority development plan for one reservoir and four levels in the middle and lower reaches of the Nu River as soon as possible and formally approve construction of the Liuku power station. In 2011, the Liuku hydropower station, located upstream of the Nu River, completed the project survey and design, and of the 28 supporting documents required for project approval, 18 were obtained or approved. The continuation and completion of the Nu River, completed the project survey and design, in 2011, the Liuku hydropower station, located upstream of the Nu River, completed the project survey and design, and of the 28 supporting documents required for project approval, 18 were obtained or approved. The continuation and completion of the Nu River hydropower construction was further verified by the release of the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Energy Development (NED) in 2013, which clearly called for “steadily start [ing] the construction of the Nu River hydropower base.” The beneficiaries of the Nu River hydropower station, including the NDRC, NED, Yunnan government, and Huadian Group, had become promoters of Nu River hydropower development.

Wang Yongchen was still concerned about the project and kept appealing for the Nu River in the media. This time, however, there would not be another happy ending. Although the Yunnan government had publicly asserted that there would be no dams before appropriately solving any problems related to environmental protection and construction, it had secretly taken actions to promote construction. On this point, the grassroots environmentalists Wang Yongchen and Zhang Kejiang were also clear. They are founders of two grassroots ENGOs, but they are also journalists of the state-owned press. They know what they can report that will not irritate the government.

Fortunately, in December 2015, the Yunnan CPC committee and government held a report meeting on poverty alleviation in the Nu River Lisu Autonomous Prefecture. Li Jiheng, the new party secretary of the Yunnan CPC, declared that Yunnan would “stop the construction of small hydropower stations.” One month later, he gave assurances on this point at the joint group meeting of the fourth session of the 11th CPPCC Yunnan Provincial Committee in January 2016. Finally, the debate and manoeuvring over hydropower station construction came to an end. To date, the Nu River hydropower stations have been cancelled.

6.4. Real Influence Reassessment and Reanalysis

6.4.1. The Strategies Taken by Grassroots ENGOs. The narrative above shows that three strategies were taken by grassroots ENGOs to push the ant-dam movements and exert influence.

The first was a bottom-up (public) strategy that involved exerting public pressure on the Chinese government. This strategy involved mobilizing public media to report on the issues and organizing celebrities to speak on behalf of the ant-dam movements, thus causing widespread public concern. Then, strong public opinion was shaped through media guidance, and a social consensus against the construction of the dams was reached. The typical path of this strategy is as follows: Celebrities or opinion leaders use social internet of things (through digital social platforms with smart phones, tablets, laptops, etc., such as visual community, BBS, and BlogChina) to express their opinions, induce and spread online discussion, attract the participation of traditional media, shape public opinion, and, finally, bring the pressure of public opinion to bear on the government.

The second was a top-down (international) strategy that involved exerting international pressure on the Chinese government, utilizing international forums and meetings as well as relevant international organizations (such as UNESCO) to gain international sympathy and support. In this way, international petitions supporting the ant-dam movements were launched, which brought pressure to bear on the Chinese government.

The third was a flank-attack (political) strategy that involved winning over deputies of the NPC, CPPCC, and members of Chinese democratic parties to exert political pressure on the Chinese government. This strategy relied on actively contacting deputies of the NPC and CPPCC (from the province to the national level) and members of Chinese democratic parties (such as the vice chairman of the Yunnan Provincial Committee of the Chinese Democratic League). It also involved drafting reports and proposals for these figures to guide the members of their political groups in advocating for the anti-dam movements through their official channels. This path of cooperation generally works as follows: Grassroots ENGOs first discuss and then confirm the topics with deputies, then conduct on-site research, investigate public opinion through the digital social platforms with smart phones, tablets, laptops, etc., form a draft proposal, and send it to deputies for further discussion and modification; finally, the deputies submit the proposal to local or national sessions of the bodies (NPC and CPPCC), which put political pressure on the government.

These three strategies applied by grassroots ENGOs constitute a three-pronged attack against the Chinese government (see Figure 1). The first prong worked from the bottom up, the second from the top down, and the third from the middle out, pushing the central and local governments to rethink the dam projects. Meanwhile, grassroots ENGOs also tried to take advantage of the fragmentation of national departments [3] and launch an inside attack against the government. For example, they worked with the CEPM to boost the ant-dam movements.
Among the three strategies, the grassroots ENGOs preferred to use the first, the bottom-up (public) strategy. The reason for this is obvious: They have very few ways of carrying out social mobilization and policy advocacy, and social Internet of things are their most straightforward and accessible resource, allowing ENGOs to express their opinions, construct and manage discussion on issues, and gauge public opinion conveniently and directly. The source of these advantages lies in the fact that there is an inherent relationship between grassroots NGOs and digital platforms: They both have a grassroots character and emphasize interaction, freedom, and anonymity. The low access threshold of digital social platforms with smart phones, tablets, and laptops allows grassroots ENGOs to bypass communication restrictions under the traditional media structure, enabling them to communicate directly with the public and convey their opinions in a timely manner. Meanwhile, the networks’ anonymity also opens doors for ordinary people’s free expression, helping allies find each other.

Nevertheless, grassroots ENGOs’ high dependence on digital social platforms also brings some problems because Internet media and platforms are usually at the center of focus in the political arena; when the platforms face less pressure related to information production, they can indeed coordinate support for grassroots ENGOs. However, when sensitive issues induce greater administrative or even political pressure, the media and platforms will choose to marginalize the issues and may even assume an opposing position, delivering a fatal blow to the issue advocacy of grassroots ENGOs.

The second favorite strategy for grassroots ENGOs is the flank-attack (political) strategy. For a long time, they actively contacted representatives of the two political bodies to promote environmental protection, trying to use the representatives’ power to influence the government’s decision-making. In 2010, several grassroots ENGOs even formed a “think tank,” using their respective professional capabilities, to help the deputies of the two sessions make proposals. In the process of providing think tank services, the grassroots ENGOs successfully embedded their own demands into proposals, which proved to be a new way for them to participate in government decision-making. This development offered a win–win outcome for both sides. On the one hand, the grassroots ENGOs achieved their goals with the help of the proposals of the representatives; on the other hand, the representatives could put forward higher-quality proposals that reflected public opinion, so the cooperation was welcomed by the two parties.

In contrast, as to the top-down (international) strategy, due to language barriers and a shortage of relevant professional and financial resources, the grassroots ENGOs’ ability to use international platforms to exert influence was quite weak, and most of the issues raised by them were one-sided and limited, making it difficult to attract the attention of international platforms. At the same time, putting pressure on China’s government through international platforms is a politically sensitive behavior that brings unnecessary political risks. Therefore, the top-down (international) strategy was the least favored tool of the grassroots ENGOs.

6.4.2. The Contribution of Grassroots ENGOs. Compared to the case of the Dujiangyan dam, the case of the Nu River dam involved more twists and turns, even though both ultimately reached a happy ending. Analyzing their different experiences can help us discover the genuine determinants of the final result in each case. It seems that by employing the three strategies above, grassroots NGOs may have exerted significant pressure on the government, which pushed it to stop the construction of the two dams. Is this true? From the information outlined above, it is undeniable that there was another opposing force within the government that was more influential and significant.

Government objections were a significant factor in stopping the two projects. In terms of the span of the ant-dam movements’ activity, for the Dujiangyan Yangliuhu dam, the campaign achieved great success in only two months, whereas success took more than ten years to achieve for the Nu River dam. The major reason is that the former campaign won the support of local governments, whereas the latter did not. Governments at all levels of Sichuan Province opposed building hydropower stations at Dujiangyan, and they took action quickly. Moreover, objections were raised through formal channels. After learning about the construction planning of the Yangliuhu Dam, Dujiangyan County, including the Dujiangyan CPC, NPC, CPPCC, and government, immediately reached a consensus against construction. The four leading groups then expressed their objections to the higher-level Chengdu units, and the four Chengdu counterpart organizations supported the objections and reported their disagreement with dam construction to the relevant provincial organizations, from which they obtained the same support.

In contrast, opposition to the construction of the Nu River hydropower stations came mainly from a few national departments, such as the CEPM, and a few individual
officials, such as Shen Xiaohui, a senior engineer with the National Forest Department. However, local governments (from the county to the province level) supported the dam construction. Among the many supporters of the Nu River dam project, Bai Enpei, who had served as the party secretary of the Yunnan CPC committee from 2001 to 2011, was the most important. During his time in office, local governments secretly promoted construction work on the Nu River hydropower stations after 2004. The Nujiang prefecture government officially proposed restarting project construction. All of these factors caused the reversal of the fate of the Nu River project after 2004 until President Xi Jinping took office in 2013. Upon taking office, President Xi Jinping paid great attention to establishing an ecological civilization and launched a government anticorruption campaign involving thousands of officials, including the major supporter of the Nu River dam project, Bai Enpei. It can be deduced that the central government’s great attention to environmental protection and the termination of the principal Yunnan official were the primary factors leading to the cancellation of this project.

Above all, it is obvious that the Nu River project was stopped because of the change in governance principles on the part of the central government and that the construction planning of the Dujiangyan Yangliuhu project was halted on account of the objections of local governments (from the county to the province level). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the efforts made by grassroots ENGOs exerted great pressure on the Chinese government. For example, during and after the anti-dam movements, officials and governments in Yunnan had to halt the project in 2004, later secretly promoted the project, and did not publicly support the construction of the Nu River dam.

The narrative above reveals two main factors affecting the fate of these two dams. The activity of grassroots ENGOs was the first factor, serving as an external cause; the opposition of the central and local governments was the second factor, serving as an internal cause. Both factors were important in the final decision-making on the construction of the two dams. As Chairman Mao Zedong said, external causes are the condition of change, internal causes are the basis of change, and the external cause works through the internal cause. The internal cause is the basis for the development of phenomena—the first element. Therefore, in these two cases, governmental forces were the decisive, leading factor that played a crucial role in the final decision-making. Regarding the Nu River case, if the central government had not changed its conception of governance and had it still prioritized development above all else, the project would not have been cancelled: It simply would have been carried forward when the wave of public opinion against the dam had subsided, similar to what occurred in Yunnan during the 2008-2013 period. In the case of the Dujiangyan Yangliuhu dam, it was because of the strong opposition of local governments that the project was cancelled.

The external cause is the condition of the development of phenomena—the second element. The pressure exerted by grassroots ENGOs was subordinate and supplemental but also non-negligible. In the two cases, grassroots ENGOs mobilized domestic and international resources, including the media, celebrities, authoritative persons, and international platforms, to bring great pressure to bear on the government. All of these pressures forced the government to act and think cautiously in making its decision. That is, grassroots ENGOs played a role in catalyzing and accelerating the decision-making on the cancellation of these two projects (see Figure 2).

The internal and external causes are interdependent and interrelated. Without the promotion of grassroots ENGOs, the public would not have paid attention to the two dams; therefore, there would have been no strong public objections, and the government would not have thought about changing its decision. However, if there had been no equal opposition from within the government, regardless of what grassroots ENGOs had done, the projects would not have been stopped. Take the Three Gorges Dam as an example: The central government overrode all objections and promoted the implementation of the project with great determination.

7. Conclusion

This research contributes to the study of Chinese grassroots ENGOs’ influence on policy-making. First, the paper finds that grassroots ENGOs have an obvious influence on final decision-making, but they are not the most important factor in changing decisions. Without determined support from within the government, they cannot succeed in altering governmental decisions by themselves alone. The force forged by grassroots ENGOs is an external factor that influences environmental decision-making, and the function of such organizations is to catalyze and accelerate changes in decisions. Their influence is external, subordinate, and secondary. The vital and leading factor influencing Chinese environmental decision-making is the internal will of the government; this internal cause determines the ultimate direction of environmental policy.

Second, this research probes the three strategies that the grassroots ENGOs adopted to influence the government.

**Figure 2: How grassroots ENGOs influenced final decision-making.**
The first was a bottom-up (public) strategy in which the grassroots ENGOs mobilized domestic media resources by wielding social internet of things and coordinating strong public opposition to the two projects. The second was a top-down (international) strategy through which the ENGOs took advantage of international forums and organizations to solicit the sympathy of the international community, organized petitions for the ant-dam movements, and appealed for help and support from the international community. The third was a flank-attack (political) strategy whereby the grassroots ENGOs actively contacted deputies of the CPPCC and NPC (from the province to the national levels) and members of Chinese democratic parties, and, by drafting reports and proposals for them, guided the members of these political groups in advocating for the ant-dam movements.

The three strategies led to pressure from three directions on the Chinese government. The first was the overwhelming pressure of public opinion against the dams. The second was the pressure of international responsibility, which subjected the government to criticism from international parties. The third was political pressure from the objections made by authorities and democratic parties, which brought the government under pressure in terms of democratic governance.

Among the three strategies, the ENGOs were most inclined to use the first one because it offers the lowest-cost and easiest way to find supporters and can help shape the pressure from overall public opinion quickly; the second strategy was also a common method. Although it has high requirements in terms of professionalism, takes more time, and involves higher costs, the political benefits are direct and fast. The third strategy was their last one. This strategy requires high language and professional abilities and may cause political risk. Although it is not often used, ENGOs may adopt it when the opportunity is available.

Although this research makes several contributions, some unavoidable limitations still exist. First, due to data limitations, strategic interactions between central government ministries and local governments have not been fully analyzed, and we do not know to what extent they influenced the final result. Second, this paper quotes a small number of details drawn from the memoirs of the two ant-dam participators, such as the number of media outlets and the names of internet forums involved in the ant-dam movements. Due to time and data availability restrictions, it is difficult to verify and confirm these details. Finally, the grassroots ENGOs also took some other measures to exert influence through their ant-dam activities, such as legal proceedings and cooperation with international NGOs. Because these practices did not attract much attention at that time, the actions are ignored in the analysis of this paper. Of course, how ENGOs influence government policy-making through legal channels and cooperation with international NGOs can also be a direction of future research.

Data Availability

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References


