

Climate-Indifference or Actions Louder than Words?

Cognition and Action of Chinese Youth with Respect to Climate Change
(Translated from Chinese)

Fan Yechao

School of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University of China

Zhu Xinxin

Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung Beijing Representative Office

Against the backdrop of the Chinese government's peak emissions target (for the year 2030) and a carbon-neutral vision (for the year 2060; announced at the 2020 UN Climate Ambition Summit), Chinese domestic discussions around climate change have picked up pace. As part of this debate, an increasing number of young Chinese people are actively trying to bring attention, support and engagement to the issue of climate change. Since young people have been recognized as drivers of climate action in many parts of the world, questions remain regarding their role in China. In how far do Chinese young people care about climate change relative to other pressing topics? What strategies do they identify as useful when it comes to youth participation in climate change matters? Compared to an abundance of macro-level policy analyses, there are only a few Chinese studies on youth and climate change. Therefore, the remainder of this article will take stock of the relevant

domestic Chinese discourse and ask some basic questions regarding its portrayal of youth in climate change: What is the definition of Chinese "youth" in these discussions? What role are young people thought to play (or could theoretically play) through actions addressing climate change? What can domestic surveys and studies tell us about how Chinese youth interpret and address the threats posed by climate change in their daily lives?

Over the past years, Chinese scholars and social organizations have published a few exploratory discussions of the above questions. These, however, mostly focused on young people's understanding of climate change, while neglecting questions regarding young people's role in mitigating greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. This paper reviews the main findings and conclusions of several such studies regarding 1) their theoretical scope and definitions of the term "youth"; 2) how young people's climate change awareness is

measured and interpreted and 3) what potential leeway for climate related participation and actions by Chinese youth is identified.

1. Definitions of Chinese youth in climate change discussions

The United Nations General Assembly defines “youth” as persons between the ages of 15 to 24 years. In China’s Mid- and Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025), the age range for youth in issues involving marriage and employment is 14 to 35 years. However, looking at the sample groups of existing studies in China, it emerges that college students are often taken to represent the entirety of Chinese youth in studies about climate action, while a large number of other young people (such as young farmers and herders) - who are arguably much more directly affected by climate change - are excluded in the relevant discussions and, presumably, in decision-making as well. In the Chinese Academic Journals Database - CNKI, the vast majority of papers with keywords “Youth & Environment” or “Youth & Climate” targeted college students. Only two papers touched rural youth, i.e. “Generation Mechanisms and Magnification Effects of the Stigmatization of Grassroots Youth Participants--An Example from the Fight for Rural Environment” authored by Zhang Jinjun and Wang Wenjuan, and “an Analysis of Factors Affecting Behavior Adaptation of Rural Youth to Climate Change” authored by Lu Chuntian and et al.

Based on a questionnaire survey (n=1057) in four provinces in Northwest China, Lu Chuntian from the School of Humanities, Xi’an Jiaotong University, et al. (2016) investigated how rural youth understand climate change and adjust their production behaviors in response to climate change. The descriptive analysis indicated that most young farmers have gained a certain understanding of climate change, primary through television, but their knowledge remains relatively limited in terms of the impacts of climate change on agricultural production, agricultural income and family life. The study also examined two types of adaptation behaviors of young farmers – passive and active. Passive adaptation behaviors include early sowing and harvesting, increasing application of fertilizers and pesticides, and increasing agricultural irrigation. Active adaptation behaviors include adjusting crop portfolios, building water conservancy infrastructure, adopting new agricultural technologies, improving the ecological environment around cropland, purchasing agricultural insurance, and withdrawing from agricultural production. It was found that, most of the young farmers in China’s Northwest have taken various measures to actively mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change on local agricultural production. Generally, the slightly older among the young farmers are found to be more proactive in adapting; they have fewer non-farm employment opportunities, more knowledge of climate change impacts acquired through media exposure; or have received relevant technical training. The

studies imply that Chinese rural youth focus their actions and their thinking on adaptation rather than mitigation. Based on the lack of such studies, they also seem hardly able to feed their observations and perceptions of climate change back into policy-relevant circles.

2. Climate perceptions of Chinese youth

Generally speaking, climate change is not among the social or environmental issues that are of most concern to Chinese youth. According to a nationally representative Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) conducted in 2010, among the 2,668 youth respondents between the ages of 17 to 34 years, only less than ten percent (7.07%) were most concerned about the “environment”, far lower than the levels of “education” (26.15%), “health care” (19.79%), “economy” (19.20%) and “poverty” (15.08%). The top three serious environmental problems selected by youth respondents were “air pollution” (32.74%), “water pollution” (18.49%) and “garbage disposal” (18.14%), while only 7.18% considered “climate change” as the gravest environment problem.

Even after a decade of rapid economic growth and continuous upgrades in environmental measures, environmental protection has not yet become one of the core concerns of Chinese youth. In February 2019, the Social Investigation Center of China Youth Daily carried out the survey on “Youth Expectations of the Two Sessions in 2019” based on demographic data at the year end of 2017

from the National Statistical Yearbook 2018. The samples were collected from persons between the ages of 18 to 38 years, of which those born after 1990 accounted for 94% and those with college and undergraduate education background accounted for 91%. The results showed that the environment ranked sixth among nine issues, attracting the attention of only 43% of the respondents, well below education (79.8%), employment (77.1%), housing (56.1%), health care (53.8%) and entrepreneurship (49.8%). Climate change was not listed as a separate option in this survey. Regarding China’s progress in environmental protection in recent years, 57.4% of the respondents felt that China has made good progress. The percentage of favorable evaluation was highest in respondents from second-tier cities or those born after 1985, but lowest among respondents from rural areas or those born after 2000. Such differences in perceptions and experiences regarding the progress of China’s environmental protection also reinforce the above observation that China’s climate discussions and studies tend to neglect youth groups outside the realm of college students.

Though less concerned about climate than education and health care, Chinese youth outperform other age groups in terms of knowledge of climate change. Based on the 2010 CGSS data, Li Xiaoguang and Yang Jianghua (2016) from the Department of Sociology of Xi’an Jiaotong University examined the cognitive characteristics of, and influences on, Chinese youth with respect to climate change. Regarding the choice of

measures, they analyzed the differences between youth groups (aged 17 to 34) and older age groups (aged 35 or older) with a view to the perceived causes and hazards of climate change, and attempted to explain such differences with regard to factors such as education level, media communication, and general environmental knowledge. The study found that Chinese youth have a significant advance in knowledge regarding the causes and hazards of climate change compared to their elderly compatriots. In other words, young people showed a higher accuracy rate in understanding the causes of climate change as they are more inclined to view climate change as a grave environmental problem. This cognitive advantage mainly stems from their higher education level, the widespread use of mass media, and the rapid growth of environmental knowledge. Despite the detailed analysis of young people's cognitive characteristics, the paper did not measure the willingness of respondents to change behavior or otherwise become active in response to climate change.

What are the characteristics of Chinese young people's perceptions of climate change when compared to other countries? Geir Orderud from the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, and Luo Jing and Zhuang Guiyang, et al. from the Chinese Academy of Social Science (2010) conducted a comparative study of college students' opinions about climate change in China and Norway based on survey data. The questionnaire survey of Chinese students (n=436) was carried out in Beijing, Hohhot, Zhengzhou and Hangzhou that vary in

climatic conditions, industrial structures, and economic development levels. The data on Norwegian students came from a national sample survey (n=525). Both surveys were conducted in 2007, and respondents were required to answer questions including local government efforts in GHG emissions reduction, emissions reduction in developing countries, adaptation actions, climate justice, and the severity of global warming. On the one hand, a general consensus emerged that climate change was seen as an important global challenge and addressing climate change as a shared responsibility of humankind. Students from both countries agreed that developing countries should not increase emissions for the sake of economic development while developed countries have an obligation to help developing countries reduce emissions. On the other hand, there emerged some differences in the opinions of students from the two countries, reflected in their attitudes towards issues such as assistance of rich countries to poor countries, technology transfer, economic aid and their respective understandings of principles of international distribution of responsibility for climate change. Contrary to Norwegian students, Chinese students considered nature (favoring practical approaches for equity of the natural system) more important than historical fairness (equity of the social system) as a principle for the reduction of carbon emissions. Gender emerged as a significant variable among the Norwegian students, but not among Chinese students.

3. Characteristics of Chinese youth in climate action

Youth climate actions along the lines of Greta Thunberg have generally been viewed as too confrontational by Chinese mainstream political actors and, hence, by most young people as well. Chinese youth primarily get involved in climate matters through the activities of domestic “mass organizations” (社 团 组 织), advocating cooperation and participating in government-sponsored climate actions, under the self-ascribed motto that “actions speak louder than words”.

Along these lines a (2020) study by Zheng Xiaowen, Secretary-General of China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN), Fu Yanan, Head of Foreign Affairs of the Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development of Tsinghua University, Zhang Jiaxuan, Head of the Youth League of the World University Climate Change Alliance (COP25), and Wang Binbin, Assistant to Dean of the Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development of Tsinghua University reviewed the historical process of, and identified important pathways for, youth engagement in global climate governance. Their paper suggested that Chinese youth should get involved in global climate governance in a process that is basically aligned with their counterparts around the world. Three pathways for engagement are identified: (1) government-led youth climate action. Example include the youth representatives of the 1,000 “Environment-friendly Ambassadors Program” launched by the Chinese government in 2009 who have participated in

many climate conferences; (2) youth climate action initiated by civil organizations; and (3) youth climate action led by academic institutions. Furthermore, the authors argued that in addition to the common identity of “youth”, youth groups can also flexibly play different roles in global climate governance such as climate researchers, climate activists and climate communicators, depending on their own strengths, interests and professions.

While it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss in how far actual consumption behaviors of Chinese young people are different from their counterparts in developed countries (where many young people are outspoken in criticizing unsustainable consumerism), data from recent media polls suggests that low-carbon lifestyles and concepts have not yet been widely accepted and practiced among Chinese youth. A large number of the current Chinese young population favors consumerism - making youth the main force driving China’s consumer economy. For example, a November 2019 national university student survey conducted by China Youth Daily showed that Chinese college students are extremely keen on online shopping, but 86.99% of student respondents reported that they barely used the items they bought online and as high as 77.53% regularly regretted buying useless items online.

Conclusions

By reviewing recent Chinese literature on the nexus of youth and climate change, the

following three conclusions can be drawn: (1) Chinese researchers have thus far focused on the response to climate change by college students. Other important groups of young people, such as young farmers in rural areas, are rarely included into these analyses. (2) Against this (limiting) backdrop, Chinese young people are found to pay limited attention to climate change, but as a whole, they are still more concerned about climate change than other age groups in China. (3) Some Chinese youth groups actively respond to and participate in climate initiatives. In doing so, they primarily answer to official (government) calls for action.

Overall, Chinese college students tend to display particularly consumerist behaviors and often lack a concern for sustainable

consumption. While climate interventions addressing individual (consumer) behaviors are often criticized as “apolitical” by Western environmental activists, the formative environment of Chinese University campuses can still be viewed as a suitable arena for Chinese youth climate organizations who are trying to convince their peers to lead a more climate-conscious lifestyle.

Future research on Chinese youth and climate change should be mindful to include the perspectives of Chinese youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds (especially marginal youth groups such as rural youth) and continue to explore the complex impact mechanisms and climate-related intervention strategies among China’s young people.

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