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doi:10.1017/bjt.2016.3 First published online 22 March 2016

# Investigating nature within different discursive and ideological contexts: case studies of Chinese and Indian coal capitals

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**Abstract.** Given that purely scientific accounts of ‘environmental performance’ and ‘development’ cannot fully explain the environment and its interactions with people, this paper investigates how nature has been historically and sociopolitically defined in different societies. The analyses and observations presented in this paper are based on a critical literature review and on case studies of two ‘coal capitals’, one in Guizhou in China and the other in Jharkhand in India. The study examines the historical representations of environmental campaigns (particularly from the 1950s to the 1990s) in the two countries, and discusses how historical, sociopolitical and ideological factors have affected conceptualizations of nature and how they are reflected nowadays in people’s narratives concerning the environment. The paper concludes that the Chinese pattern of development, as well as of knowledge construction, reflects a greater intention of homogenizing the public with the language of development deployed by the centralized power; meanwhile, the Indian pattern allows a greater space for the representation of conflicts, including people’s struggles against the state. The comparative analysis enriches our understanding of people’s responses to official perceptions of the environment endorsed by modern science and governance.

## Introduction

In early 2014, an article entitled ‘Beijing or New Delhi: who has the worst air pollution?’, published on the *chinadialogue*,<sup>1</sup> triggered a discussion between my colleagues and me. The article makes reference to the 2014 Environmental Performance Index report

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I would like to thank Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, Vinita Damodaran and Peter Po-Han Lee for their helpful feedback on a previous version of this manuscript. I thank the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable comments. Thanks to the group of scholars involved in this volume for their input. My appreciation also goes to Jahnvi Phalkey, Tong Lam, Sigrid Schmalzer, Elena Songster, Arunabh Ghosh and Diganta Das, for providing me suggestions that helped to improve the presentation of the paper.

1 The *chinadialogue.net* is a Web medium focusing on the environmental crisis in China and its neighbouring countries. The international organization is funded by a range of institutional supporters and based in London and Beijing. For the article see Joydeep Gupta, ‘Beijing or New Delhi: who has the worst air pollution?’, *chinadialogue*, 3 February 2014.

published by Yale University,<sup>2</sup> which ranks both China and India in the bottom five among 178 countries in terms of poor air quality. Since then, the competition and comparison between the two countries and their capitals with regard to air pollution has continued. During the period of the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference (also known as COP 21, 30 November–11 December 2015), the air quality performance of the two giant Asian countries was again put under the spotlight.<sup>3</sup> Policy analyst Abheet Singh Sethi, referring to the up-to-date data generated by sensors placed in the two capitals, pointed out that Delhi's average air pollution has been much worse than that of Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Commentators suggested that it is the different administrative responses to air pollution in the two cities that separate them.<sup>5</sup> The Beijing government announces a red alert when the level of PM<sub>2.5</sub> particles is expected to exceed two hundred micrograms per cubic metre for more than three consecutive days and private vehicles with odd and even number plates are strictly banned from the road on alternate days, whereas a comparable measure has yet to be enforced in Delhi.<sup>6</sup> The series of discussions show that different agencies and actors might react to an environmental reality in different ways. Thus understanding the issues regarding 'the environment' is not only a scientific matter but also a sociopolitical one.

Historical geographers have investigated how our view of nature – as a product of culture – reflects human society's changing concerns.<sup>7</sup> Historian Carolyn Merchant suggests that the mainstream values of development, endorsed by Western civilization and modern science, have contributed to 'the death of nature as a living being and the accelerating exploitation of both human and natural resources in the name of culture and progress'.<sup>8</sup> Merchant's work challenges an orthodox perception of nature founded in a Western perspective, and suggests alternative viewpoints, such as that of women and

2 Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and Center for International Earth Science Information Network, 2014 Environmental Performance Index.

3 Corinne Abrams, 'Why Delhi doesn't have a Beijing-style response to pollution', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 December 2015, available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2015/12/09/why-delhi-doesnt-have-a-beijing-style-response-to-pollution/>, accessed 18 December 2015; Doug Bolton, 'Beijing continues to suffer from pollution, but Delhi's air quality is one-and-a-half times worse', *The Independent*, 11 December 2015, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/beijing-pollution-smog-air-quality-environment-delhi-india-china-a6768611.html>, accessed 18 December 2015; Times News Network, 'If Delhi was Beijing, it would shut 29 of 30 Days', *Times of India*, 11 December 2015, available at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/If-Delhi-was-Beijing-it-would-shut-29-of-30-days/articleshow/50129301.cms>, accessed 18 December 2015.

4 Abheet Singh Sethi, 'Delhi's pollution one-and-a-half times worse than Beijing', *IndiaSpend*, 10 December 2015, available at: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-s-pollution-one-and-half-times-worse-than-beijing/story-zGXWwA0sMG3nwTEeU59SaP.html>, accessed 18 December 2015.

5 Abrams, op. cit. (3); Bolton, op. cit. (3).

6 PM<sub>2.5</sub> is fine particulate matter that is less than 2.5 microns in diameter. It is prone to carrying heavy metals and chemicals, and its small particle size allows it to reach a large surface area and penetrate deeper into the lungs.

7 Clarence James Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

8 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980, p. xviii.

socially marginalized groups. Based on a literature review and field research in two coal capitals – one in Guizhou in China and the other in Jharkhand in India – my study will examine how environmental discourses have historically been defined to a considerable extent by a centralized state authority, or, in other cases, how they have been inter-constructed by various initiatives, including civil dynamics. Note that there is no assumption that discourses on the environment among the population will without doubt go along with government-led approaches; instead, this study aims to analyse how government-led discourses from different sociohistorical backgrounds influence people's interpretations of nature differently.

The usage of coal is a predominant cause of air pollution. Meanwhile, it is by far the leading source of energy, which fuels the national 'development' of the two economies. Coal makes up 78 per cent of the domestic energy balance in China and 68 per cent in India, while, for the European Union countries as a whole, coal burning contributes less than 30 per cent to their energy supply.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the environmental cost of coal use, coal combustion accounts for more than 70 per cent of black carbon and of carbon emissions in both countries.<sup>10</sup> On a global scale, China and India together contribute around 40 per cent of global anthropogenic black carbon emissions. This explains why coal production and consumption in these two countries has always been a hot topic both nationally and internationally.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there is currently little evidence to suggest that an adjustment to a low-carbon development route is being achieved by either of them.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, with regard to the national development agendas of both countries, coal mining has constantly played an essential role and has not become significantly less important over the last decades. The situation was clearly explained in the recent speech by Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, at the opening of COP 21.<sup>13</sup> According to

9 International Energy Agency, *Energy Balances of Non-OECD Countries 2012*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012.

10 Black carbon, also known as soot, is a solid carbon particle formed through the incomplete combustion of biomass and fossil fuels. Scientists believe that it accounts for about one-fifth of observed global warming. See Jeremy Carl, *Rising from the Ashes: India's Black Carbon Opportunity*, Philadelphia: Center for the Advanced Study of India, 2009; Lesley Sloss, *Black Carbon Emissions in India*, London: IEA Clean Coal Centre, 2012. Yushi Mao, Hong Sheng and Fuqiang Yang, *The True Cost of Coal*, Beijing: Greenpeace China, 2008; Shiv Pratap, Avinash Chandra and Ashok Kumar Raghav, 'Carbon dioxide emissions from coal based power generation in India', *Energy Conversion and Management* (2006) 47, pp. 427–441; Sloss, op. cit. (10).

11 Xia Cao, 'Regulating mine land reclamation in developing countries: the case of China', *Land Use Policy* (2007) 24, pp. 472–483; Surabi Menon, James Hansen, Larissa Nazarenko and Yunfeng Luo, 'Climate effects of black carbon aerosols in China and India', *Science* (2002) 297, pp. 2250–2253; Roger Moody, *The Risks We Run: Mining, Communities and Political Risk Insurance*, London: International Books, 2005; Sloss, op. cit. (10); *Coal, China, and India: A Deadly Combination for Air Pollution?*, Washington, DC: The Worldwatch Institute, 2005; Brian Tilt, *The Struggle for Sustainability in Rural China: Environmental Values and Civil Society*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013; Tim Wright, *The Political Economy of the Chinese Coal Industry: Black Gold and Blood-Stained Coal*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

12 Peter Newell, *Globalization and the Environment: Capitalism, Ecology and Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

13 Statement by prime minister at COP 21 Plenary Paris, 30 November 2015, available at [https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris\\_nov\\_2015/application/pdf/cop21cmp11\\_leaders\\_event\\_india.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/cop21cmp11_leaders_event_india.pdf), accessed 19 December 2015.

Modi, developing countries still need conventional energy such as coal, and to impose an end to its use is to impose economic barriers to these countries.

While Modi's statement suggests that the issue of distributive justice should be considered in the global negotiations, what was left unmentioned was that the domestic distribution of energy and the benefits of development are no less problematic. In 2012, 28 per cent of the coal resource of India was accounted for by Jharkhand – the largest coal producer among the states of the country.<sup>14</sup> However, it ranked fifth from bottom with regard to its per capita income among the thirty-two states and union territories.<sup>15</sup> According to my experience of staying in the area, its grid remains insufficient and unstable; blackouts happen on a regular basis and sometimes occur randomly. Similarly, Guizhou ranked fourth in the production of raw coal among all Chinese provinces in 2012;<sup>16</sup> nevertheless, it had the lowest gross national income per capita in the country.<sup>17</sup> These understandings justify my purpose in studying the coal-mining issue, and, particularly, in including ethnographic studies of coal-mining villages as a source of environmental discourse different from statements or representations made by powerful agencies. This interest is also a response to the importance of including participatory or lay knowledge in the production and validation of knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Both Jharkhand and Guizhou are rich in coal (and other mineral productions) and rich in ethnic diversity, and suffer from socio-economic marginalization. Given these common features, however, the two sites were not selected prior to commencing the fieldwork but decided upon after meeting informants and making connections on my field trips. The key reason for this was that instead of targeting a specific site with clear environmental campaigns, my research interest lay in tracing the process of discourse construction and how ordinary residents understand the environmental conditions in their regular lives.

In this study, I examine historical representations as a social element that has the potential to influence the sociocultural atmosphere and discourse construction, and which can also inspire later generations' decision making in response to environmental degradation. This paper assesses some iconic events or campaigns that have happened in India and China with regard to the environment in the second half of the twentieth century. Additionally, the narratives collected in the two coal-mining areas provide an important source of knowledge that is an alternative to conventional expertise. Lay knowledge of

14 Government of India and Ministry of Mines and the Indian Bureau of Mines, *Indian Minerals Yearbook 2012*, available at [http://ismenvis.nic.in/Database/Indian\\_Minerals\\_Yearbook\\_2012\\_Vol-III\\_4734.aspx](http://ismenvis.nic.in/Database/Indian_Minerals_Yearbook_2012_Vol-III_4734.aspx), accessed 19 July 2015.

15 Government of India, *State-Wise Per Capita Income and Gross Domestic Product at Current Prices, 2013*, available at <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/others/2013/dec/d2013121703.pdf>, accessed 19 July 2015.

16 China National Coal Association, *2012 National Coal Production Notification, 2013*, available at [www.coalchina.org.cn/detail/13/09/25/00000033/content.html?path=13/09/25/00000033](http://www.coalchina.org.cn/detail/13/09/25/00000033/content.html?path=13/09/25/00000033), accessed 19 July 2015.

17 UNDP China and Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies, *China National Human Development Report 2013*, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/sustainable-and-liveable-cities-toward-ecological-civilization>, accessed 19 July 2015.

18 Karin Bäckstrand, 'Civic science for sustainability: reframing the role of experts, policy-makers and citizens in environmental governance', *Global Environmental Politics* (2003) 3, pp. 24–41; Timothy Forsyth, *Critical Political Ecology: The Politics of Environmental Science*, London: Routledge, 2013.

nature is the lens through which this paper intends to assess the dynamics that jointly construct environmental discourses in the two societies, including state authority, civil society and grass-roots society. The rest of the paper will present comparative discussions on India and China in relation to three themes: (1) the nature of state involvement in environmental politics, (2) languages of development deployed in regional development and (3) people's attitudes towards nature.

Admittedly, there are numerous historical events related to environmental development, as well as plenty of ideologies and narratives in the two countries, that this paper cannot cover – some of these may demonstrate different scenarios from those that will be set out in support of my analyses. What I am going to present in this paper is the mainstream trend of each country's usage of the concept of 'the environment', which I observed as influential during my fieldwork. I have no intention of reinforcing a binary opposition between China and India. Rather, the purpose of this study is to provide a reflective perspective on the representations and constructions of 'the environment'.

### **State involvement and consciousness of the internal Other in environmental development**

This section will investigate the different contexts of historical representation within which nature has been understood from the second half of the twentieth century onwards in China and India. When it comes to natural development, both countries have the issue of internal colonization by a developmentalist state, but what separates them, as I am going to elaborate, is whether the society has activated the consciousness of the 'internal Other' in its environmental discourses.

Historian Richard Grove indicates that encounters between the colonial empires and the colonies, such as India, have contributed to the evolution of environmentalism (in Western societies).<sup>19</sup> In the coming paragraphs, I will argue, with historical examples, that the perception of the environment in post-colonial India is an inter-construction of the forces of colonialist domination and anti-colonialist resistance.

In several historical representations, bottom-up mobilization and popular protests have characterized environmental movements in India.<sup>20</sup> These movements have been portrayed not only as ecological movements but also as 'movements for survival and

19 Richard Hugh Grove, 'Origins of Western environmentalism', *Scientific American* (1992) 267, pp. 42–47.

20 Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'Ecological conflicts and the environmental movement in India', *Development and Change* (1994) 25, pp. 101–136; Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; Shashi Ranjan Pandey, *Community Action for Social Justice: Grassroots Organisations in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991; Pramod Parajuli, 'Ecological ethnicity in the making: developmentalist hegemonies and emergent identities in India', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* (1996) 3, pp. 14–59; Ashok Swain, 'Democratic consolidation? Environmental movements in India', *Asian Survey* (1997) 37, pp. 818–832.

against exploitation by the developmentalist state',<sup>21</sup> in which 'people are resisting an "exploitative" state structure and a development model that they presume excludes them'.<sup>22</sup> One example was the Chipko movement, initiated in the early 1970s by Himalayan peasants in order to prevent local trees from being felled by loggers acting on behalf of outside commercial investors. Historians Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier consider the movement as 'the direct inspiration for a series of popular movements in defence of community rights to natural resources'.<sup>23</sup> As pointed out by geographer Emma Mawdsley, it has become one of the most frequently cited movements in the literature on socio-environmental mobilizations in the 'global South', and the interpretations made by scholars might have provided a certain strategic inspiration for later activists both inside and outside the country.<sup>24</sup> Note that, as Mawdsley goes on to argue, local community action to demand self-management of natural resources is not only a purely conservationist movement, but also a campaign to preserve the local economy. Nevertheless, it demonstrated the dimension of a 'cognitive praxis' of Indian social movements, in anthropologist Pramod Parajuli's words, by offering 'a site where historical conjunctures are shifting, new envisioning processes are occurring, and new knowledge is articulated and practiced'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the various interpretations of the movement became a rich source of inspiration for later community-based ecological campaigns that is different from government-led discourse.

A similar tendency can be observed in the case of the Save Narmada movement, which was initiated in 1989. Thousands of activists and villagers joined the campaign, which lasted for nearly a decade, to protest against the Narmada dam project in Gujarat. Their slogans included, 'We want development; not destruction' and 'Self-rule in our villages'.<sup>26</sup> Funded partly by a World Bank loan, its financial composition made the project a typical example for critics, who could argue that the agenda of 'national development' was an arm of international capitalism. The discourses associated with the Save Narmada movement illustrated the idea that considerations of autonomy involve both external and internal debates – for instance, India versus foreign forces and the indigenous communities versus state authority. Similar to the Chipko movement, several discourses or meanings have been associated with the Save Narmada movement for a variety of purposes. As pointed out by sociologist Amita Baviskar, the link between *adivasi* struggles and the Gandhian spirit of decentralization might be engendered with the intention of boosting or driving the campaign.<sup>27</sup>

21 Parajuli, op. cit. (20), p. 16.

22 Swain, op. cit. (20), p. 819.

23 Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 1997, p. 5.

24 Emma Mawdsley, 'After Chipko: from environment to region in Uttaranchal', *Journal of Peasant Studies* (1998) 25, pp. 36–54.

25 Parajuli, op. cit. (20), pp. 32–33.

26 Baviskar, op. cit. (20), pp. 205–209.

27 Baviskar, op. cit. (20). *Adivasi* in Hindi stands for 'original inhabitants'; it refers to the aboriginal peoples of the Indian subcontinent. Some researchers suggest that the *adivasis* have developed their lifestyle and social structures over many centuries in accordance with the laws of nature. See Felix Padel and Samarendra Das, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*, New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

Geographer Sarah Jewitt, based on research in Jharkhand, suggests that we should critically consider ‘development’ as ‘a modern form of Orientalism’.<sup>28</sup> As pointed out by Jewitt, ‘development’, as a new mindset, was promoted in the name of the “‘national interest’” in spite of the resistance to scientific forestry by those dependent on the forests’.<sup>29</sup> Indigenous communities, the *adivasis* in many cases, usually have rich knowledge and skills relating to the environment, and they also have the greatest motivation to ensure the sustainability of the land on which they live.<sup>30</sup> However, ironically, the discourses of ‘national development’ often construct the local communities as the ‘(internal) Other’. In this context, tension between the developmentalist state authority and the ‘internal Other’ emerged.

Recognizing the reality that major conflicts over natural resources were taking place in the regions that were inhabited by *adivasis*, Parajuli applies the concept of ‘environmental racism’ to analyse the development experience of post-Independence India and to point out the congruence between ecological and ethno-regional movements.<sup>31</sup> Parajuli argues that both the Chipko and the Save Narmada movements, as well as the *adivasi* campaigns that happened in Jharkhand over centuries, were demanding regional autonomy, development justice and the self-management of local resources.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, in the case of the Save Narmada movement, the scale of the debate was raised to a globalized level. Concerns, however, regarding internal colonialism, and tensions between the plains-based planners or state officials and the hill population, were never absent in Uttarakhand, Narmada valley or Jharkhand.<sup>33</sup> In short, the representations of these indigenous movements implied that a community-based participatory economy was demanded by the people, while at the same time these movements were frequently taken as models or inspiration for later subaltern environmental resistance against the centralization of (state) power.

28 Sarah Jewitt, ‘Europe’s “Others”? Forestry policy and practices in colonial and post-colonial India’, in Stuart Corbridge, Sarah Jewitt and Sanjay Kumar (eds.), *Jharkhand: Environment, Development, Ethnicity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 56–85. The theoretical basis of this debate can be traced to Edward Said’s work on Orientalism and Othering. See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979.

29 Jewitt, op. cit. (28), p. 83.

30 Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul, *Common Lands and Customary Law: Institutional Change in North India over the Past Two Centuries*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996; Vinita Damodaran, ‘Famine in a forest tract: ecological change and the causes of the 1897 famine in Chota Nagpur, Northern India’, in Richard Hugh Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan (eds.), *Nature and the Orient*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 853–890.

31 Noting that the critiques of ‘environmental racism’ have been made mostly in a Western context, particularly in the United States, while in the countries of the ‘South’, like India, the notion of ‘environmentalism of the poor’ has been applied more frequently to convey a similar concern about environmental conflicts between communities, corporations and states. Nevertheless, examining the postcolonial settings from an anti-racism perspective, as demonstrated by Parajuli’s work, can foreground the social structures that embed environmental inequality and internal colonialism. See Guha and Martínez-Alier, op. cit. (23); Carolyn Merchant, ‘Shades of darkness: race and environmental history’, *Environmental History* (2003) 8, pp. 380–394; Parajuli, op. cit. (20); Ruth Rosen, ‘Who gets polluted: the movement for environmental justice’, *Dissent* (1994) 41, pp. 223–230.

32 Parajuli, op. cit. (20).

33 Baviskar, op. cit. (20); Mawdsley, op. cit. (24); Parajuli, op. cit. (20).

Historically, the condition of inner colonization can evidently be seen in rural China as well. For example, historian Mark Elvin identifies that ‘Guizhou was Chinese colonialism in action’, and, as a typical colonial scenario, it was linked to the quest for raw materials between dominant and dominated social groups.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the *adivasi* culture in India, the Miao tradition also contains an environmental perspective in which human beings should follow the natural norms to maintain the cycle of life. However, assimilation has been enforced since at least the seventeenth century and the austere tradition of the Miao ethnicity could not withstand the power of the dominating Han Chinese culture.<sup>35</sup>

However, China’s mainstream historical writing on ecological campaigns has not reflected the issue of inner colonization as well as India’s. This may be explained partly by the historical fact that China has never been colonized as a whole by Western imperial powers,<sup>36</sup> and partly by the reality that in modern China policies of cultural assimilation and anti-separatism have been carried out intensively.<sup>37</sup> Chinese historian Wenhui Hou pointed out frankly that, ‘In China, few people know the term “environmental history” ... Very few Chinese historians have considered that the study of history is inseparable from the study of the relationship between man and nature, society and nature’.<sup>38</sup> As for civil activism, the collectivist period (1956–1978) in communist China witnessed, in the words of political scientist Peter Ho, an ‘absence of civil society’.<sup>39</sup> After that, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, a few social movements emerged; however, the protesters who took part in the mass mobilizations ‘have without exception been repressed and/or forced into exile’.<sup>40</sup> The following paragraphs will briefly illustrate how discursive power over nature was historically monopolized by the political leadership in China.

To study nature–humanity relations in Chinese culture, the notion of *tian* (sky, heaven) is closest to the meaning of ‘god nature’.<sup>41</sup> During the Chinese dynasties, the

34 Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 216–272.

35 Elvin, op. cit. (34), pp. 218–220; Tong-Shou Fan, ‘Governance of Qian during the early Qing Dynasty (清代前期治黔述论)’, *Studies in Qing History* (清史研究) (1993) 1, pp. 73–82.

36 It has merely been divided by the authority and conceded or leased to Western countries; the experience of Hong Kong with the British is an example.

37 Byung-Kwang Park, ‘China’s ethnic minority policy: between assimilation and accommodation (中國少數民族政策：擺盪於同化和融合之間)’, *Review of Global Politics* (全球政治評論) (2013) 41, pp. 25–44; Ronald Francis Price, *Education in Modern China*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

38 Wenhui Hou, ‘The environmental crisis in China and the case for environmental history studies’, *Environmental History Review* (1990) 14, pp. 151–158. Note that this article was a report presented at a conference held in 1989, and the context of the report was mainly discussion of the situation for ‘Chinese historians’ ‘in China’, where, according to Hou, ‘history studies are in crisis because of changes in the political and economic situation’ by that time. That is, the paradigm of Marxism and Mao’s thought had begun to be criticized and a new paradigm was yet to appear. Of course, recent decades have witnessed an increase in research on Chinese environmental history, such as that of Mark Elvin, Judith Shapiro and Robert Paul Weller.

39 Peter Ho, ‘Embedded activism and political change in a semiauthoritarian context’, *China Information* (2007) 21, pp. 187–209, 192.

40 Ho, op. cit. (39), pp. 187–188.

41 Robert Paul Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.



emperor of the country was referred to as *tianzi*, which means ‘son of heaven’, because the emperor had the power to rule over ‘everything under the sky/heaven’ (*tianxia*).<sup>42</sup> In this system, the power of the emperor was given by *tian*; in other words, the inherent force of nature was applied to endorse the dominator’s power over the people. Elvin suggests that throughout the modern history of China, ‘nature’ has been strategically deployed by Chinese politicians and modernizers. It is also argued by Elvin that the effects that Chinese traditional beliefs had on maintaining the natural environment appeared to be relatively small when compared with the negative impacts on nature caused by the pursuit of power and profit by anthropogenic interactions.<sup>43</sup> The experiences of the Chinese between the 1950s and the 2000s may serve as examples.

Since the 1950s, China has experienced the political propaganda imposed by Mao Zedong, the first state leader of the People’s Republic of China, that ‘man can/must conquer nature’ (*rendingshengtian*: ‘to improve the lives of the poor, nature should be defeated’). As argued by political scientist Judith Shapiro, as well as other scholars, Mao’s approach to the natural environment showed little respect towards nature as a life-support system, and his attitude, which was rooted in his military mentality, has influenced China for decades.<sup>44</sup> The effects of this ideology remained during the first decades of China’s post-Mao era and were reflected in the methods adopted by the state leadership for natural-resource management. This ideology was adjusted during the Chinese reform era (from 1979 on) under the rule of Deng Xiaoping; then, however, there was a tendency towards capitalization and commodification. The notion of ‘putting money above everything else’ turned out to be the new catchphrase of propaganda; however, it did not signify a break in exploiting environmental resources.<sup>45</sup>

The Three Gorges Dam (on the Yangtze river) is a remarkable example of human behaviour exploiting nature during this period. Its construction began in 1994, by which time the problems of large-scale dam building had already invited reflections from a selection of scholars. In the 1980s, international organizations devoted to monitoring and fighting against large dam projects had been established and had gained increased attention. *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, published by Goldsmith and

42 The concepts of *tianzi* and *tianxia* can be traced back to the Zhou (also transliterated ‘Chou’) Dynasty, prior to 221 BC, and were used by subsequent Chinese emperors; scholars suggest that they provided an ideological foundation for the Chinese system of empire. See Julia Ching, ‘Son of Heaven: sacral kingship in ancient China’, *Toung Pao* (1997) 83, pp. 3–41; Yu-lan Feng, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983; Tingyang Zhao, ‘Rethinking empire from a Chinese concept ‘All-under-Heaven’ (Tian-Xia)’, *Social Identities* (2006) 12, pp. 29–41.

43 Elvin, op. cit. (34).

44 Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China’s Future*, 2nd edn, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011; Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Kai Xu, ‘Review of the recent studies on environmental NGOs in China (近年来中国环境非政府组织研究：进展、问题与前景)’, *Issues of Contemporary World Socialism* (当代世界社会主义问题) (2007) 91, pp. 53–61; Yong Dong Zhang, *History of Institutional Reform in Rural China after 1949* (一九四九年後中國農村制度變革史), Taipei: Free Culture Press (自由文化出版社), 2008.

45 Shapiro, op. cit. (44).

Hildyard,<sup>46</sup> was one product of that trend, as was the International Rivers Network founded in 1985, which gathered a following of several anti-dam activists and researchers internationally. The Save Narmada movement in India was one milestone in the global dynamic that led to the World Bank withdrawing its involvement in the project in 1995. Apparently, China was not going to slow down its dam construction. On the contrary, its decision to build the Three Gorges Dam invited much critique from researchers and is recognized as an illustration of China's authoritarian and bureaucratic structure.<sup>47</sup> Its technical, financial, social and environmental failings were stated by a range of scholars, both inside and outside the country, before its construction, but their voices were either overruled, ignored or silenced.<sup>48</sup> This governance approach has been criticized by Elizabeth C. Economy, a researcher on Chinese policy, who has argued that 'without the freedom to question scientific beliefs and practices and to propose alternatives, the Chinese expert community was stifled in its ability to provide informed and useful analysis to the political elites'.<sup>49</sup> Anti-dam campaigns did not have an obvious effect on official decision making in China until the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, the economic reform led by Deng did not bring about social reform. In the same year that the Save Narmada movement was initiated in India – 1989 – China witnessed a crucial conflict between the people and state authority during the Tiananmen Square protests. The military suppression of the demonstration resulted in many intellectuals and ordinary Chinese people being silenced for daring to disagree with political orthodoxy.

The above comparison shows that, despite the fact that a developmentalist state leadership that was trying to dominate resource distribution was evidenced in both countries, different social atmospheres allowing various degrees of freedom in relation to discourse and richness of language can cause different historical representations of development conflict (between the state and the people), and result in a rather active or a relatively conservative campaign arena. The ideology of anti-colonization has more visibly supported and encouraged people's movements in Indian society. This is not to say that similar actions have not taken place in China; however, actions in the country were represented less as movements resorting to anti-colonization and self-governance.

46 Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard, *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1984.

47 Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988; Kristen Nicole McDonald, 'Damming China's Grand Canyon: pluralization without democratization in the Nu River valley', PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2007.

48 McDonald, op. cit. (47); Shapiro, op. cit. (44).

49 Economy, op. cit. (44), p. 56.

50 The Save the Nu River movement is one example initiated in 2002. The project was 'paused' in 2004 by Wen Jiabao (then premier of the State Council); however, the government is attempting to restart it following the policy of promoting hydropower, mentioned in China's 12th Five-Year Plan. See State Council of the People's Republic of China, '12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015)', Beijing, 2011.

### Different 'languages of development' deployed in regional politics

To a certain degree, the independence experience of India has provided the foundation for the language of anti-colonialism and self-determination. Its history of colonization and anti-colonization has resulted in a culture that emphasizes the importance of fighting for rights against the intrusive state. In this context, indigenous rights and community autonomy have been better recognized and argued (even if they have not necessarily been more appreciated by state leaders) in Indian society. This background, together with the critical approaches inspired by socialism or ecological Marxism among intellectuals, has contributed to the relatively critical social atmosphere in India and provided a justification for environmental rights campaigns, especially those emphasizing autonomous rights and community values. Environmental political scientist Arun Agrawal's work provides an example, which highlights the possibility of a decentralized approach that changes relations between decision makers, common residents of local communities and the environment.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, the establishment of the People's Republic of China was a result of a revolution in the name of the 'people's struggles'. However, amid the tendency towards authoritarian communism, the result was a series of policies that turned their back on nature. During the state-enforced collectivization campaigns, people's rights to land and property were withdrawn. The difference between the two societies is evident in their regional politics of development and people's attitudes towards the environmental degradation that has come along with 'development', as I am going to elaborate.

Contemporary rural Jharkhand, during my fieldwork period, witnessed campaigns against river pollution, land acquisition and *adivasi* community displacement. In my Indian case study, it was noticed that the discourse that emphasizes the linkage between the environment, land rights and indigenous rights is at the core of many demonstrative activities. The language that speaks of *adivasis* together with the environment in the coal-mining area and brings out criticism of the existing power structures was shared among several of my interviewees. 'One cannot study the environment without considering the *adivasis*' – similar expressions were used by several activists. The *adivasis* are recognized as being the descendants of the original population of the Indian subcontinent who have developed their social norms in accordance with the law of the ecosystem.<sup>52</sup> Respondents mentioned that Dhanbad, a city in Jharkhand, which is also known as the coal capital of India, has experienced overdevelopment, and most of the benefits have not trickled down to the local community: 'Dhanbad has already been taken [from the people] ... Mining was there even during the British time, the Tata [Steel Limited] also. After Independence, the mining businesses were given the power ... the [common] people were sacrificed for the "national development"' (Vikram, 40s, male). What has been presented here in the narratives is the idea of combat between two forces of ideology. On one side is the radical socialism that appreciates the rights of the indigenous community and the value of common

51 Arun Agrawal, *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

52 Padel and Das, op. cit. (27); Myron Weiner, *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 157.

property resources, while on the opposite side is capitalism and the developmentalist state. For example, a sociopolitical activist in Jharkhand shared his opinion with me:

One hundred percent of the issues concerned with land rights in Jharkhand are connected with tribal peoples. It is a question of colonization. It is a question of powerful people, maybe from the majority, who have the political and economic and state power ... [who] were using their power to subjugate another group of people, who were denied power. (Jarvis, 60s, male)

I observed that local residents used language that challenged colonialism and the monopolistic distribution of resources in their conversations about the environment. However, this kind of language was less evident in my Chinese case study. In the narratives of my Chinese respondents in Guizhou, the effects of a suppressing authority and silenced civil society were reflected.

At certain stages throughout the development of modern China, people have been mobilized and local resources have been utilized to help in nation building. As the coal industry developed over the course of Chinese history, privately run small coal mines experienced two peaks: one in 1985 and another from 1992 to 1995. Both peaks occurred as a result of people's response to the call made by state leaders.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, 1985–1995 marked a boom, a period in which small-scale businesses sprang up everywhere and villagers could make money easily. The people in the villages had an expression: 'You could make money just walking around. Money was there to be made'. Both pride and sadness could be sensed when listening to the villagers recalling that period.

The sadness stemmed from the fact that the policy was changed in the late 1990s. The Party introduced a closure policy and rescinded the permission of private small coal mines to operate without a licence. Researchers point out that the tightening of this policy corresponded to the time when coal production in China had met its market demand.<sup>54</sup> State leaders applied the licence system to slow down 'mobilization' and control production in order to safeguard the profits of state-owned businesses. Most of my interviewees stated that this policy was enforced suddenly. Within a few years, many families who used to earn from the coal in their land lost their legal source of income. Unlike the language that I heard in the Indian context, which demands self-determination, many of my Chinese respondents said to me, 'Once state policy is enforced, people cannot argue ... Someone will come and check; if one dares to open the coal site again in private, the government will soon come to know and bomb it' (Fanling, 30s, female). The villagers found that there was no space for negotiation, and they made reference to a saying: 'Humans should not fight against heaven [*tian*], people should not fight against the mandarin, privately owned businesses should not fight against state-owned businesses'.

Comparing the two cases, while Indian society allowed space for endorsement and diverse interpretations of historical events such as the Chipko movement or the Save Narmada movement by academic and civil society, the spirit of the 'people's struggle'

<sup>53</sup> Lei Shen and Philip Andrews-Speed, 'Economic analysis of reform policies for small coal mines in China', *Resources Policy* (2001) 27, pp. 247–254; Wright, op. cit. (11).

<sup>54</sup> Shen and Andrews-Speed, op. cit. (53).

in Chinese society was not realized in fighting for one's rights. Instead, this spirit of struggle was channelled by a discourse of unified national identity and set in the frame of a 'nation-building' process; accordingly, there was a lack of narrative about community-based development amongst the ordinary people in the village. Voices concerned with personal rights faded from the discourse about development and the environment. This corresponds to what was mentioned in the previous section: the Tiananmen event and the decision to build the Three Gorges Dam demonstrated the suppression of intellectuals and civil society,<sup>55</sup> and the monopolization of power over the discourse. By censoring media content, regulating academic discussions and restricting NGO activities and public gatherings,<sup>56</sup> the authoritarian restrictions imposed by the Chinese leadership on discursive constructions within society have remained an issue in the early twenty-first century.

Indeed, the space for other social actors to engage in campaigning in the Chinese environmental arena is getting markedly bigger. China, in the last decade, has witnessed the emergence of several civic campaigns. For instance, Andrew Mertha's work *Water Warriors* illustrates how journalists, scholars and NGO activists have influenced contemporary China's hydropower projects, such as in the Save the Nu River movement initiated in 2002.<sup>57</sup> A series of protests against paraxylene chemical plants happened in 2007 (in Xiamen, Fujian Province), 2011 (in Dalian, Liaoning Province), 2013 (in Kunming, Yunnan Province) and 2015 (in Shanghai). The phenomenon of cancer villages (*aizheng cun*) has drawn attention from scholars as well as media practitioners.<sup>58</sup> Last but not least, earlier this year the documentary produced by Chai Jing, *Under the Dome*,<sup>59</sup> brought another peak in the discussion about smog and PM<sub>2.5</sub> in the country. The documentary received more than 100 million hits on Chinese websites. From this, we can see that civic media and actors seem to be allowed a certain space nowadays in China to produce alternative expertise; however, it is also a harsh reality that *Under the Dome* and related discussions were banned by the state within a week. While the coverage of Chinese publications has been restricted by the political leadership, the ideology promoted by the authorities might be reflected in, and reinforced by, published output. An example of its effects is that, due to a lack of sufficient access to alternative discourses, although the villagers in my case study are familiar

55 Ho, op. cit. (39); McDonald, op. cit. (47).

56 Economy, op. cit. (44); Sam Geall, 'China's environmental journalists: a rainbow confusion', in Geall (ed.), *China and the Environment: The Green Revolution*, London: Zed Books, 2013, pp. 15–39; Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, 'Regulating intellectual life in China: the case of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences', *China Quarterly* (2007) 189, pp. 83–99; Anthony J. Spires, 'Contingent symbiosis and civil society in an authoritarian state: understanding the survival of China's grassroots NGOs', *American Journal of Sociology* (2011) 117, pp. 1–45.

57 Andrew C. Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.

58 Lee Liu, 'Made in China: cancer villages', *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* (2010) 52, pp. 8–21; Anna Lora-Wainwright, *Fighting for Breath: Living Morally and Dying of Cancer in a Chinese Village*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013. "Cancer village" in spotlight', *China Daily*, 10 May 2004, available at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-05/10/content\\_329171.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-05/10/content_329171.htm), accessed 18 December 2015.

59 Jing Chai, *Under the Dome* (穹頂之下), 2015, documentary, 104 min., in Chinese.

with the notion of *aizheng cun* (cancer villages), they shrugged and said, ‘it is nothing novel, we have plenty of cancer villages in the area’, and showed little reflection on the unbalanced distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. They either make no link between the environmental risks and their illnesses, or hold no intention or hope of altering the situation by pressuring state agencies.

It is worth noting that this paper aims neither to argue that all actors in Jharkhand are holding a critical viewpoint and are ready to challenge state policy or any dominating power, nor to hint that ordinary Chinese people are ignorant due to obscurantism. Instead, with the comparison I am presenting, the difference lies in the languages of development. To a certain extent, the condition reveals that Indian society, compared to Chinese society, has some relatively well-established discourses that are ready to be applied by social actors in favour of demands for self-determination in order to pose critiques of socio-environmental injustice. In the Chinese scenario, unlike a conventional postcolonial context, the notion of self-determination or self-governance is lacking; to put it another way, the language of a unified national identity is relatively well constructed in Chinese society.

While historical collective experience has an effect on constructing national identity, language, as argued by social scientist Benedict Anderson, also plays an important functional role in helping the authorities to imagine a ‘nation’ and include regions in the centralized discourse of development.<sup>60</sup> Unlike India’s multilingualism, the promotion of monolingualism in China laid the basis for a centralized unified nationalism. A unified language reinforced the administrative power of the central government in promoting policies, as well as the adoption of these messages by the public. The influence of the propaganda that enforced a unified consciousness in shaping the individual sense of a national identity can still be perceived, especially among senior generations. One of my interviewees expressed his faith in the ‘(imagined) community’: ‘there is no difference among the various places as long as that is found within the motherland’. This example illustrates the concept of a unified ‘motherland’ that generalizes the vastness of China. This is different from the idea of ‘the sons of the soil’, which emphasizes the origin and belongingness of different (cultural) communities and their attachment to a specific area of land, which was often referred to in the Indian context. This will be further elaborated in the next section.

The different presentations of languages of development can also be exemplified by cultural productions. For instance, two films were produced between 2011 and 2012 (during my fieldwork) which present the stories of Guizhou and Jharkhand. The Chinese film, *Shancun Fengyun: The Storm Riders of Mountain Village*,<sup>61</sup> tells a story of how a volunteer teacher and a coal-business owner won the villagers’ trust with the help of village cadres, and solved the safety problem of a coal mine beneath the village school. The Indian movie *Gangs of Wasseypur* presents the history of

60 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 2006.

61 Bei-Bei, *Shan Cun Feng Yun: The Storm Riders of Mountain Village* (山村风云), 2011, feature film, 80 min., in Chinese.

development in terms of the formation of coal mafias in rural Dhanbad.<sup>62</sup> The story follows the trajectory of a Muslim family that struggles, generation by generation, with a Hindu capitalist-turned-politician who dominates the interests of the area. Both of them present some ‘conflicts’ in relation to coal; however, they deploy different languages of development. In *Shancun Fengyun*, the voices of the Chinese individuals are presented in a way that seeks maximum public interest. The rational considerations of each person lead to a single aim, which is to enrich the biggest interest of the village, to fulfil the ideal of Great Harmony. In contrast, *Gangs of Wasseypur* puts more focus on the power struggles in the social environment – in terms of one’s battles for family honour, ethnic pride and upward class mobility. It also presents debatable aspects of the coal region, in terms of the economic and political monopoly of the ruling elite.

The film about Guizhou hints that there are also mafia and violence in Chinese coal villages – the coal-business owner has a mafia background but wants to be a legitimate businessman and to win the village committee director’s election. However, the mafia are ‘harmonized’ into followers of the law. On the other hand, the Indian movie *Gangs of Wasseypur* displays many scenes of gunfights; these gunfights are due to conflicts of interest between different religions and gang groups. This offers an example through which we can be better aware of the implementation of a ‘harmonious language’ by the media through propaganda and see different ways of presenting ‘development’ of coal-mining areas.

### Laypeople’s attitudes towards nature: the ethic of *tian* and the value of land

While government leaders justify the official development agendas with the discourse of ‘inclusive development’, when it comes to land acquisition locals experience an exclusive mechanism that prevents them from benefiting from the development plans. In relation to this, in this section, I include the narratives shared by ordinary people in my fieldwork to enrich the analyses regarding the ideological factors that either facilitate campaigns to grow or dissolve people’s attempts to have some power in public arenas.

Throughout Indian development history, evidence of ethnic division and social stratification is easy to find, and this can be traced back to before the colonial era.<sup>63</sup> Many would agree that a colonialist ideology has never been absent from the Indian subcontinent, especially in tribal areas with rich natural resources such as Jharkhand.<sup>64</sup> Instead, after the British colonizers left, the most resourceful of the national elites re-enacted

62 Anurag Kashyap, *Gangs of Wasseypur (Part I and Part II)*, 2012, drama feature film, 320 min., in Hindi.

63 Dietmar Rothermund and D.C. Wadhwa (eds.), *Zamindars, Mines and Peasants: Studies in the History of an Indian Coalfield and Its Rural Hinterland*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1978, p. xv.

64 Stuart Corbridge, ‘The continuing struggle for India’s Jharkhand: democracy, decentralisation and the politics of names and numbers’, *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* (2002) 40, pp. 55–71; Damodaran, op. cit. (30); Susana Devallé, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992; Jewitt, op. cit. (28).

and reinforced the colonialist ideology through neocolonial governance techniques,<sup>65</sup> including environmental governance, such as forest policies, land acquisition and resource distribution.<sup>66</sup> In Jharkhand, for instance, these in turn were enforced by both the immigrant investors and new dominators of the native peoples. This might explain why anti-colonialism became a key theme of critical discourse in the area.

One important idea that supports anti-colonialism in Indian society is the concept of emphasizing the value of the ‘sons of the soil’, which conveys the idea of the collective rights of certain ethnic groups over their territories.<sup>67</sup> This idea was reflected in the slogans raised in *adivasi* movements: ‘The water, land and forests are ours – you cannot rule over us’; ‘We would rather die than give our land’. These sayings reveal that nature is seen as an extension of their life, or vice versa. I heard a story from the *adivasis* which is shared among their community. When a senior member of the family dies, the body is buried in the land and one piece of stone is set above it. Therefore, by counting the standing stones, people come to know that their ancients have been living there for several hundred years. In the *adivasis*’ traditional belief, the spirits of the ancients become part of nature, and this is one of the reasons why they consider the land to be an element of their life that should be carried on from generation to generation. This traditional belief forms the basis of the value of the sons of the soil and provides ideological support for indigenous communities to fight for participation in the development. This explains why, in many cases, these campaigns are initiated by *adivasis* who ethnologists believe are the descendants of the Indian subcontinent’s original population; with ‘animistic’ religious philosophies, these communities adequately represent the concept of sons of the soil.<sup>68</sup> Within such a mindset, the legal regulation that mentions the rights of indigenous peoples, declared by the United Nations, simply provides an extra reference point with which to justify their campaigns; meanwhile their environmental rights are natural rights that justify themselves.

As elaborated by historians and geographers, indigenous consciousness and the link between tribes and territory in Jharkhand is a historical construction, which was fuelled by different discourses during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to serve the purpose of several political and social campaigns.<sup>69</sup> For instance, the global environmentalism discourse was associated with the *adivasis*’ right to forest in support of Jharkhand’s separatist movement in the twentieth century.<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that the community spirit of the sons of the soil actually reflected the cultural and language identity more than the blood and ethnic aspect, and thus the value of the sons of the soil

65 Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 2004.

66 Corbridge, op. cit. (64); Jewitt, op. cit. (28).

67 Weiner, op. cit. (52).

68 Weiner, op. cit. (52).

69 Corbridge, op. cit. (64); Vinita Damodaran, ‘The politics of marginality and the construction of indigeneity in Chotanagpur’, *Postcolonial Studies* (2006) 9, pp. 179–196; Devalle, op. cit. (64); Jewitt, op. cit. (28).

70 Jharkhand gained its independence from Bihar in the year 2000. See Corbridge, Jewitt and Kumar, op. cit. (28).



was a concern not only of the *adivasis*, but also of the ordinary Jharkhand people. A non-*adivasi* resident of Ranchi (the capital of Jharkhand) shared with me his critique of conditions after independence and why he feels that people's movements are still required:

By the time of independence, people out there realized that there must be economic opportunities that would come along with independence. So a lot of immigrants moved into Jharkhand who are not indigenous; they are the comparatively rich people, businessmen or politicians. (Rakesh, 20s, male)

As part of the process of gentrification, these economic immigrants turned out to be the new dominators; they enforced their rules – market-based mechanisms – over the *adivasis* and other resource-poor local residents. The narrative of Rakesh reflects the continuous anxiety of the local communities regarding the immigration of dominating elites and harassment by landlords and moneylenders, and demonstrates concerns about the value of the 'sons of the soil'. Similar criticisms, and an emphasis on locality, were noticed among the narratives of several activists. Economic exclusion reinforced the marginalization of the indigenous people, and forced migration has resulted in their 'cultural genocide'; to quote a term used by a respondent, 'Their [traditional] economic activities are minimal because they never create "surpluses" ... However, in mainstream Indian Hindu culture, profit is God, money is God' (Jarvis, 60s, male).

One Indian journalist shared with me an experience that happened to him in 2008. An *adivasi* woman was tempted to accept compensation to leave her land. The company offered two lakhs of Indian rupees (around £2,000) for several acres of land; this appeared to be a massive sum of money for her since the largest amount of money she had ever seen was fifty rupees (around £0.50). In the absence of cultural assimilation by means of public education, it is difficult for remote indigenous individuals to negotiate with regard to development projects. An economist based in Jharkhand expressed his opinion on the gap between the two different value systems:

The market came only after the industries came. So, how do people value the land? ... These fields might have existed for two hundred years and might exist for another two hundred years. Why are you valuing it for only ten or fifty years? So what is the evaluation? There are economic evaluations and there are non-economic evaluations. How do you measure the non-economic ones? (Rahul, 50s, male)

The non-economic value of the land to the community lies in the connection between human beings and nature; in other words, it is represented by the spirit of the 'sons of the soil'. The discourses shared by the elite civil activists that criticize colonialism and claim the right to self-determination for the *adivasi* communities on the one hand provide ideological support for indigenous movements. However, on the other hand the tendency towards oriental imaging and romanticism can be sensed in how the indigenous culture is described as 'never creating surpluses' and cherishing the value of nature in a non-economic manner. Descriptions of these kinds might slowly lose their explanatory value in reflecting realities. When the *adivasi* subculture loses its animistic aura, the discursive linkage between the preservation of indigenous cultures and environmental conservation might become questionable.

According to China's national census data, 36.11 per cent of the Guizhou population are composed of more than fifty ethnic groups other than the Han Chinese.<sup>71</sup> In fact, this percentage is higher than that of the population termed 'Scheduled Tribes'<sup>72</sup> in Jharkhand (26.2 per cent).<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, the perception that distinguishes internal and immigrant communities, or mainstream and minority cultural members, is not as significant in the case of rural China. Recall the catchphrase mentioned earlier: 'Humans should not fight against heaven [*tian*], people should not fight against the mandarin, privately owned businesses should not fight against state-owned businesses'. I heard this saying more than once from members of a family living near to a proposed construction site for a coal-washing plant. The site did not overlap with their land, so there was no deal available in terms of replacement in their case, even though their house was less than fifty metres from the site and the impact of the pollution was predictable. 'We can do nothing until it starts operation and the pollution becomes evident. Maybe by that time we can argue for some compensation', said a member of the family. Although it was a privately owned project, in the understanding of the villagers, as long as an investment is permitted it is backed up by official force and 'people should not fight against the mandarin'. A similar attitude was observed in stories shared by other informants, whether in relation to land acquisition for road widening to enhance coal transportation, to replacement for coal exploration, or to damage to houses caused by land subsidence due to mining. In all of these cases, the villagers took a conservative position until the pollution became concrete or conflict came to light and then they appealed to the village administrative office for a settlement. This situation partly corresponds with anthropologist Anna Lora-Wainwright's study, which states that peasants are hesitant to identify environmental problems and the harm caused due to their lack of confidence in making scientific judgements.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, it demonstrates a harmonious attitude towards the power of nature. Since pollution is inevitable and the mining industry is the fundamental economic activity of the village, they accept the environmental condition with a sense of fatalism.<sup>75</sup> The attitude can be sensed in another folk saying that I learned during my fieldwork, 'Humans' work cannot compete with nature's work, as the grain will get mature at the same time no matter whether it's planted earlier or later'. This saying reflects the traditional Chinese philosophy in terms of 'harmony between heaven and mankind',<sup>76</sup> with its tendency towards moderation and adaption in response to inherent force. On the one

71 National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, *2010 Sixth National Population Census Data Gazette (No. 1)*, 2010, available at [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428\\_30327.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/201104/t20110428_30327.html), accessed 25 December 2015.

72 'Scheduled Tribes' (STs) is the official designation given to ethnic minority groups by the Indian Constitution.

73 Government of India, *Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe Population of India*, 2011, available at [www.tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Demographic.pdf](http://www.tribal.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Demographic.pdf), accessed 25 December 2015.

74 Lora-Wainwright, op. cit. (58).

75 Anna Lora-Wainwright, Yiyun Zhang, Yunmei Wu and Benjamin van Rooij, 'Learning to live with pollution: the making of environmental subjects in a Chinese industrialized village', *China Journal* (2012) 68, pp. 106–124.

76 Shapiro, op. cit. (44); Weller, op. cit. (41).

hand, this shows the tendency to rely on natural power, while on the other hand it shows the passive attitude towards achieving change with the human arm. Another interviewee expressed a similar understanding of how nature conditions people's living standards:

Our environment here is different from provinces such as Henan or Jiangsu. Those places are 'the towns of fish and rice',<sup>[77]</sup> where to protect the environment makes sense because nature can feed the locals with good quality and quantity of food. But here, we cannot earn our living with agriculture itself. That makes the condition of our lifestyle. (Dengyi, late 20s, male)

In other words, the villagers are aware of the value of the ecosystems with which they conduct their daily economic practices. However, the narratives reflect a passive attitude rather than a struggling spirit that intends to 'conquer nature'. While this harmonious attitude towards nature remains in contemporary Chinese culture – in spite of the ideological revaluation led by authoritarian state leaders – at the same time the linkage between *tian*/nature and the political leadership also continues. Thus inactivity and powerlessness can be sensed in the people's responses to official decisions.

One key theme that must be evaluated is how Chinese development agendas on the one hand mobilize natural resources to promote industrialization and modernization, while on the other they demobilize the people. In particular, the development discourse emphasizes the force of moving forwards or progressing and involving natural resources; however, it disempowers the ordinary people from moving forwards – it silences the public voice, makes natural resources inaccessible to the common people, and makes some of them feel that they have been left behind. The ideology that 'man can/must conquer nature' emphasizes the battle between humans and the difficult environment; however, despite the fact that great harm has been done to the environment in China, at the same time it has failed to empower the poor in their struggle for rights.

From my observations, in the idea that 'man can/must conquer nature', the 'man' indicates the mandarins and the political leaders. It is the political leaders who have the power to deliver narratives regarding environment–development agendas and distribute natural resources. The 'man' in this context does not include the ordinary people who live with nature and whose livelihoods are influenced by the environment in a relatively direct manner. While the authorities hold the belief that 'man can/must conquer nature', on the people's side there is more of an identification with the concept that 'Humans should not fight against heaven [*tian*]'. Although the modern Chinese revolution has notionally overthrown imperialism, the connection between *tian* and the rulers remains, as does the belief in, and obedience towards, the 'inherent force'. Several issues can be identified here. First, the idea of hierarchy remains from the viewpoint of the people. The sociopolitical hierarchy, as a mixture of an official motto and a folk ethic, is interpreted among the public as: the political elite, followed by the environment, and then the ordinary people. Within such a hierarchy, ordinary people's rights have to be sacrificed in the interests of national development. Under official propaganda and with coercion, natural resources are mobilized to serve the purpose of national development, which is arranged

77 'The towns of fish and rice' (*yumizhixiang*) is used to describe the place where the land is rich in nature, with rivers and proper irrigation systems, so it is very productive in terms of agriculture and aquaculture.

and controlled by the political dominators rather than serving the needs of the people. Second, the modern officials are still called ‘mandarins’ in the spoken language, and the inherent force of heaven towards human beings is used as a metaphor to illustrate that the power of the political authorities overrides the rights of ordinary people. Third, the hierarchy is acknowledged in both the political and economic spheres; it could be argued that the two are highly indivisible in contemporary Chinese society and that political privilege can determine economic privilege.

My field experiences in some ways correspond to the statement made by historian Philip Huang: the rural administration illustrates the pervasive and intrusive network of state power.<sup>78</sup> It was established during the state-making process of modern China and extended downwards to commune and village levels during the decades of despotic rule. Huang’s description relates to China in the last century. In my observation, at present, in spite of the centralized power easing, or losing its justification as civil society gradually becomes active, some ordinary people in remote areas still hold an image of an absolute centralized power. Alternatively, the cadres maintain their role as the agency of an unquestioned authority in order to maintain their influence. The authoritarian discourse of ‘struggle’ does not cause empowerment on the people’s side. Even though there was a radical revolution that caused exhaustive transformation in China,<sup>79</sup> the social realities, in my case study, seem to suggest that the ideology of harmony and obedience remains. Meanwhile, some of the ordinary people, more or less, still link the power of authority to the unquestioned inherent power of nature.

## Conclusion

This paper has evaluated the different discursive and ideological contexts within which nature has been understood in China and India from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. It has examined how government-led development agendas have influenced the people and how their impacts have been represented and interpreted. While internal colonization exists in both Jharkhand and Guizhou in terms of resource management, people’s responses to unbalanced distribution have actually been represented in quite different ways, which I call the different ‘languages of development’. In their different languages of development, we find that the ‘ecological campaigns’ were historically represented by different tendencies, and this was somehow the result of the different nature of the state’s involvement with, and people’s interpretations of, the environment.

The contrast between the two countries revealed that critical and challenging discourses have been acknowledged and distributed to a greater extent in Indian society. Their environmental activists and intellectuals, in supporting contemporary popular

78 Philip C.C. Huang, “‘Public sphere’/‘civil society’ in China? The third realm between state and society’, *Modern China* (1993) 19, pp. 216–240.

79 Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, especially Chapter 4, ‘India and China’, pp. 112–142; Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967; Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

campaigns, make reference to the critical ideology that was established earlier when combating the colonial empire. Although the discourse that links the poor and nature tends to give particular weight to the socialist tendencies of environmental movements, it provides endorsement of later movements (e.g. the *adivasi* land rights campaigns in rural Jharkhand today) and enlarges the network of actors involved. In the case of China, political authority enforced the ideology of exploiting nature in the name of fulfilling the people's requirements. Critics argue that this was undertaken to fulfil the needs of the nation state under the domination of Party leaders. Deforestation and dam construction were enforced extensively with little reflection on social and environmental impact, as the voices of intellectuals and the public were silenced. Moreover, fieldwork findings suggest that ordinary Chinese people still have faith in the power of *tian*, and more or less associate state leaders with this natural power. The Chinese respondents in this study consider their 'environmental rights' to be endowed and protected by political authority. On the other hand, in the Indian case, especially with regard to indigenous communities, their rights are given by nature, naturally. The *adivasi* ethic and the concept of the sons of the soil make them feel protected by nature and at the same time these aspects make them protectors who have the right to speak for the environment. This is based on, and enforces, the idea of self-determination of local resources.

This paper has no intention of arguing that ordinary Chinese people are ignorant of, or satisfied with, their existing condition. As mentioned above, the past decades in China have witnessed a growing number of protests against chemical plants, mining projects and significant pollution. Civil actors are allowed and they are gaining more space in which to argue their rights. However, the media's coverage of people's movements can still evidence significant operations of censorship and propaganda. Without sufficient freedom of discourse, Chinese civil activists and NGOs have to stay away from addressing social needs that might raise people's grievances against the government and they have to avoid democratic claim-making.<sup>80</sup> As for ordinary people, among the villagers I encountered in my case study, most of them are – or hold the view that they are – discouraged, and sometimes prevented or even forbidden, from challenging the authoritarian agendas and expressing their suspicions regarding later outcomes before they occur. In contrast, the absence of autocratic authorities in India has allowed its people to deploy discourses more actively in connection with the environment and speak out for their rights.

While many may agree that environmental problems have cross-boundary features, this comparative study has proved that the conceptualization of the environment is not unified between different cultural contexts or between urban and rural communities. This reaffirms the importance, as highlighted recently,<sup>81</sup> of engaging local communities' perspectives within contexts of daily life to investigate the complexity of the relationship between the environment, mining and development. That is, cultural and social

80 Spires, op. cit. (56).

81 Jixia Lu and Anna Lora-Wainwright, 'Historicizing sustainable livelihoods: a pathways approach to lead mining in rural central China', *World Development* (2014) 62, pp. 189–200.

dimensions should be taken into consideration in order to deal more effectively with environmental crises.

In sum, the findings suggest that the Chinese state authority shows more intention of homogenizing the public with the centralized power, while Indian civil society provides more social and discursive resources for people to raise their voices, including some against the state. Such a difference was reflected in people's interpretations of the environment. The findings have led to the consideration that the possibilities and difficulties of participatory development, as well as of participatory knowledge production, with regard to environment-related matters, are worthy of further investigation in future work. Meanwhile, being aware of the limitations of applying existing environmentalist perceptions that are conventionally used in a Western or well-developed context in order to explain the conditions of Chinese or Indian rural society, it is critically important to bring research issues to bear on the local circumstances of the two Asian settings, and I hope that this paper has made a contribution to this endeavour.