

Concerned Citizens: China's Local Commitments to Climate

Guests: Jennifer Turner, Jude Blanchette, Scott Moore

Hosts: Kathleen Lyons and Wania Yad

JENNIFER: Back in 2006/2007, we started seeing Chinese citizens coming out onto the streets protesting the construction of PX chemical plants in the city centers. And they were organized on social media. People would just simply say, "We're taking a walk." And you'd have tens of thousands of people just show up and very peacefully walking with signs, just saying, we don't want this plant.

WANIA: That was Jennifer Turner from the Wilson Center's China Environment Forum speaking on the history of citizen engagement with environmental issues in China.

KATHLEEN: We're your hosts, Kathleen Lyons and Wania Yad, graduate students from the University of Delaware working with the Center for Strategic and International Studies Journalism Bootcamp.

WANIA: We're making this podcast a month after COP26, where the US and China made a pledge to cooperate on climate.

KATHLEEN: Leading into COP26, China pledged to reach peak CO2 emissions by 2030 and become carbon neutral before 2060.

WANIA: Given these top-down commitments, we talk with experts to learn what climate action looks like at the local level in China.

JUDE: So a concerned citizen in China, who was worried about the effects of climate change or wanted to push for action, could reach out to local communist party officials or government officials to make their concern known. They could also raise what's called a petition, which is a system by which Chinese citizens can raise complaints. And then there are other means through party representation and party bodies, where, in theory, citizens can raise complaints. One of the problems is that these channels often don't result in action and are more symbolic than they are substantive. Citizens who are fundamentally unhappy with policy don't have much recourse to push for change. And this has led to social pressure, oftentimes building up because they're not able to see change earlier on. And then occasionally it will explode when there are protests over environmental degradation.

KATHLEEN: That's Jude Blanchette, the Freeman Chair in China Studies at CSIS.

WANIA: While protests are one way for social pressure to release, there are other types of climate engagement that feed into a bottom-up impact on meeting China's climate agenda.

KATHLEEN: Jude isn't the only expert on China who has seen these social pressures at the local level. Scott Moore, the director of China Programs and Strategic Initiatives at the University of Pennsylvania also talks about this issue.

SCOTT: Environmental activism is more widely tolerated than other forms of activism. China has

been facing increased air, water, and soil pollution in recent years. And the state sees environmental activism as, in part, sort of a pressure release valve for any public discontent that could result from that.

WANIA: However, international and local NGOs are still restricted by the government.

KATHLEEN: In 2016, the Chinese government made a law restricting foreign NGOs, which had a cooling effect causing some international groups to pull out of China but causing others to shift to a fully local staff.

WANIA: This is just one example that public engagement with environmental issues has evolved to a self-sufficient, homegrown model.

SCOTT: I would say that kind of role for international environmental NGOs has to some extent been replaced just by indigenous expertise that China has developed in terms of climate and energy policy.

JENNIFER: It's hard to count how many NGOs are in China. Sometimes I often say that there's, like, there's an NGO. There can be an NGI, non-governmental individual: an academic researcher, a business person who is trying to support some kind of grassroots activism or change.

KATHLEEN: The local participation and indigenous expertise that has developed suggests an active commitment to climate cooperation in China.

WANIA: We invite listeners to consider what this could mean for continued US-China cooperation on climate following COP26.