

# Transnational NGO cooperation for China's Climate Politics

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## Abstract

The article investigates pathways of how international NGOs do - in cooperation with Chinese NGOs – influence the official Chinese stance on climate change politics. Empirical facts state that even if China does not provide supporting policies to its newly emerging environmental NGOs, these can increasingly influence politics. Part of their success relies on their cooperation with international NGOs and scientific communities that also work for the goal of climate protection.

Based on theories of international relations, the so-called “spiral model” developed by Risse et al. for the human rights field is for the first time applied to the field of environmental politics. A model of causal mechanisms between efforts of international NGOs and local NGOs is first developed and then tested in order to find out how local NGOs are able to leapfrog a repressive state and directly cooperate with international NGOs to work on the international agenda of global environmental problems.

Findings include a revised model of how transnational cooperation between NGOs can take place. The results of the case study show that epistemic communities with their instruments of information sharing have a stronger say on Chinese climate politics than NGOs with their pressurizing strategies. These results should provide valuable inputs for discussion on the role of NGOs in countries with repressive governments and limited civil society.

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## ***I. Introduction***

### **1. China's changing position in the climate regime negotiations**

China is becoming one of the crucial factors for the advancement of the international regime on climate change. Due to its population size and its increasing energy demand, China is presently on second position in the worldwide ranking of countries responsible for anthropogenic changes to the earth's climate with its greenhouse gases making up 17.94% of the world's total (Germanwatch 2007).

The questions of who is responsible for the phenomena of climate change and who is obliged to act is leading to a stalemate between developing and developed countries. The official position of the Chinese government in the international climate negotiations resembles that of other developing countries: citing the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities", the demand for action is put on developed countries which have been responsible for the majority of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the last 150 years due to their process of industrialization. On the other hand of the story, industrialized countries like the U.S. make their participation in the Kyoto Protocol depended on the inclusion of China in legally binding obligations to cut their GHG emissions. The response of developing countries to this stalemate is often an appeal to the industrialized world to acknowledge actions that have been already taken on their national level as a sufficient contribution by developing countries to mitigating global climate change.

Taking this relative viewpoint on the Chinese politics of climate change, one can acknowledge a substantial change in position within China's climate change politics on the national level. Within two decades, China has changed its position from being an adversary of taking any responsibility for climate protection towards being – at least rhetorically - an advocate of global environmental and climate protection politics. While Deng Xiaoping, political leader of China 1976-1990, proclaimed Maoist-like slogans of economic growth at all costs, the Chinese government has incorporated "economic growth decoupled from emission growth" as one objective in their Five-year-plans since 1996 (China Environment Yearbook 1995:196). At the international level, China has ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2002, and on the national level, the Chinese government is increasingly designing and implementing policies with a positive (side-) effect for climate protection. Policies and measures to curb GHG emissions domestically are at least rhetorically justified by the objective of climate protection. It seems that the international norm of "climate protection" has found its way into Chinese national politics.

This article takes a constructivist approach and argues that the change in Chinese climate change politics can be explained by an internalisation of the norm of environmental and climate protection by the Chinese government. The research question guiding this analysis is: *How has the norm of "climate protection" become internalised into Chinese politics, respectively how has China become socialised into the international community of states that ratified the Kyoto Protocol?*

The focus of the analysis is on the role of Chinese and international NGOs as norm advocates and the impact of their cooperation on norm transfer, socialisation of the state, and ultimately Chinese climate change politics. A causal model about interlinkages between international NGOs and local NGOs is first introduced and then tested in order to find out how local NGOs are able to leapfrog the national government and directly cooperate with international NGOs for their national work on climate politics.

## **2. The role of Chinese and international non-governmental organisations within Chinese climate politics**

In China, an increasing number of voices from civil society are demanding a strengthening of the government's regulations and actions concerning environmental protection and climate change. The Tsinghua NGO Research Centre estimates the number of unregistered NGOs in China to be about 1.6 million (Brie/Pietzcker 2004:7), according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the number of registered NGOs in China has been 142 000 in end of 2003 (Morton 2005:521).<sup>2</sup> Since about a decade, non-governmental organisations with an environmental focus have been blossoming in China; Chinese non-governmental organisations that take a stance on environmental and climate politics account roughly over 100 organisations in 2007. The first regulation about registration procedures for NGOs had been adapted in 1989, and had been since then revised twice.<sup>3</sup> For a registration, Chinese NGOs need to fulfil four criteria to be able to register: 1. they need approval of the Ministry of Civil Affairs; 2. they need to find a bail which has to be a governmental institution; 3. they can only operate in an regional/issue area where no other NGOs is already engaged in; and 4. their financing has to be secured (Brie/Pietzcker 2004:20). The Chinese government considers the actions of its domestic NGOs as acceptable as long as these are in line or even supporting official governance politics e.g. for the protection of endangered species, natural reserves, or the promotion of renewable energies. The border line between government organised NGOs (GONGOs) and independent NGOs is vague because even a NGO which is financially independent from the government needs its support for its daily operations. Clashes with the government occur if NGO arguments and actions are critical and not in line with the Government's official stand.

A new phenomenon also for Chinese NGOs working on the climate change issue is an increasing cooperation with international NGOs (INGOs). The legal situation for international NGOs in China is not yet specified so that most INGOs choose either to set up a branch office in China or to simply finance like-minded Chinese NGOs. Even if the Chinese government does not provide supporting policies to its newly emerging environmental NGOs, these can increasingly influence politics. Part of their success relies on their cooperation with international NGOs and scientific communities that also work for the goal of climate protection.

## **3. Article outline**

The article investigates pathways of how international NGOs in cooperation with Chinese NGOs influence the official Chinese stance on climate change politics. In the first part of the article, the constructivist approach of socialisation and norm internalisation is briefly introduced. The so called "spiral model" developed by Risse, Ropp and Sikkink as a causal explanation for the transnational cooperation between NGOs has proven valuable for the human rights field. The model will be described and adopted for its application in the field of environmental politics. In part two of this article, the revised spiral model is then applied for process tracing the impact of international and Chinese NGOs in the climate change politics of China. The article concludes with a discussion on the role of environmental NGOs in countries with repressive governments and limited civil society and their possibilities to link up with international civil society.

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<sup>2</sup> The large gap in these two estimations results from different definitions of "NGO" either as "non-profit organisation" or "social organisation".

<sup>3</sup> Regulations for Registration and Management of Social Organisations, Peoples Republic of China State Council Order No. 250. Available in English at: [www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/298](http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com/node/298). [05.01.2007].

## ***II. Taking a constructivist approach in explaining change in national climate politics***

### **1. The constructivist approach of socialisation and norm internalisation**

The assumption that a change in Chinese climate politics has been induced by an internalisation of the international norm of “climate protection” marks this article as part of the constructivist approach to international relations of which basic assumptions will be briefly introduced. Typical for the constructivist approach is the assumption that norms are defining the interests of actors and thus provide the starting point for actions. The causal priority of norms for the explanation of interests is derived from the constructivist image of an actor and her impetus for acting. In contrast to rationalist schools of international relations, the constructivist approach conceptualises a person as a *homo sociologicus*, an actor that is guided in her behaviour by the logic of appropriateness and a “bounded rationality”. Behaviour according to the logic of appropriateness means acting according to one’s own perceived identity and according to the acting expectations of one’s own norm community – one does not maximize one’s interest or power, but acts according to one’s role which is defined by norms (March/Olsen 1989:160-162; March/Olsen 1998:951f.; Hasenclever/Mayer/Rittberger 1997:155-157). The concept of “bounded rationality” breaks with the idea that actors have the full range of information and full capacity of decision-making available (Simons 1957). Instead, norms are helping as “road maps” in the process of decision-making (Goldstein/Keohane 1993:13ff.). In contrast to ideas, which are held individually, norms “have an explicit intersubjective quality because they are collective expectations” (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:7). In analogy to the socialization process of individuals, one can also speak of a socialization process of states, if these take up norms shared by the international community of states and thus gain recognition of being a community member. Because constructivists conceive norms to have a “compliance pull of their own”, states sometimes act in ways against their self-interest, but in accordance with an international norm (Franck 1990:37; Hurrell 1993:53f.). In this line, the internalisation of a norm is considered to be part of a socialisation process into the international community. Thus, this article analyses to which extent the international norm of “climate protection” has been transferred to the Chinese national level by the means of a socialisation process of the Chinese government into the international community that holds on to the norm of “climate protection”.

“Socialisation” can be defined as “the induction of new members... into the ways of behaviour that are preferred in a society (Barnes/Carter/Skidmore 1980:35)”, while “norm internalisation” is understood as the incorporation of norms into the “standard operating procedures” of domestic institutions which are independent from changes in individual belief systems (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:17). The concept of “norm internalisation” is a crucial criteria for a successful socialisation, but unfortunately hard to operationalize.

The most important precondition for a socialisation process is the existence of a social structure, a specified norm codex, on which the social order of a community is built upon. In analogy to groups of individuals, state communities also adhere to norms which may change over time: e.g. statehood and the recognition of being a sovereign state has long been the dominating norm of the international state community. Up to today, the catalogue of norms of membership has become more diverse: norms like democracy and human rights have been transferred from the national debate towards the international level and are influencing in turn the national debate within states via the international discourse. Environmental protection has become one important new norm of the world community. Approximately beginning with the first UN conference on the human environment in 1972 the topic gained a solid position in

international politics.<sup>4</sup> And since about 30 years the field of environmental politics is also gaining prominence within political science.<sup>5</sup> The increasing popularity of the topic and the accompanying regulation in international regimes justifies the assumption that the individual idea of environmental protection has become a communal norm in the international society. But why are states increasingly making the decision to acknowledge and comply with the norm of environmental protection? A possible explanation might be expectations by the international state community on its members to take responsibility and action for environmental protection. Old as well as new potential members of this community face the choice of either accepting the norm or of not fulfilling an increasingly important membership criterion. However, the decision towards favouring a certain norm of the international community is often hampered by traditional norms from the state's domestic political realm which might be in opposition to the international norm. Research so far has shown that the domestic integration of an international norm is more likely if the international norm can be easily connected to traditional collective beliefs of national institutions and political culture (Checkel 1997; Cortell/Davis 1996; Ulbert 1997).

In all cases of norm internalisation, but especially in cases where international and national norms collide, "norm entrepreneurs" play an important role as actors transmitting and enforcing the international norms.<sup>6</sup> Every entity of a norm community can act as a norm entrepreneur, but within the field of environmental politics, international organisations, epistemic communities<sup>7</sup> and non-governmental organisations are the most common. All of these actors can be part of the transnational advocacy network which is defined as "those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and a dense exchange of information and services" (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:18; Schimmelfennig 1994:344; Risse-Kappen 1995; Keck/Sikkink 1998:2). The possibility of a transnational advocacy network to influence national politics is dependent on the one hand on its size and strength<sup>8</sup> and on the other hand on the material and social vulnerability<sup>9</sup> of state under consideration (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:5). If domestic advocates of a norm cooperate with actors of the international norm community, likelihood increases that this transnational advocacy network is able to make the norm-violating state to succumb to the international norm (see illustration below).

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<sup>4</sup> A good indicator is the increasing number of international agreements for environmental protection which have increased in number, scope and impact. The "Register of International Treaties and Other Agreements in the Field of the Environment" of UNEP counts 152 multilateral agreements up to 1990 of which alone 102 have been ratified between 1970-1990.

<sup>5</sup> Zürn 1998 provides a good overview on the development of international relations in the field of international environmental politics.

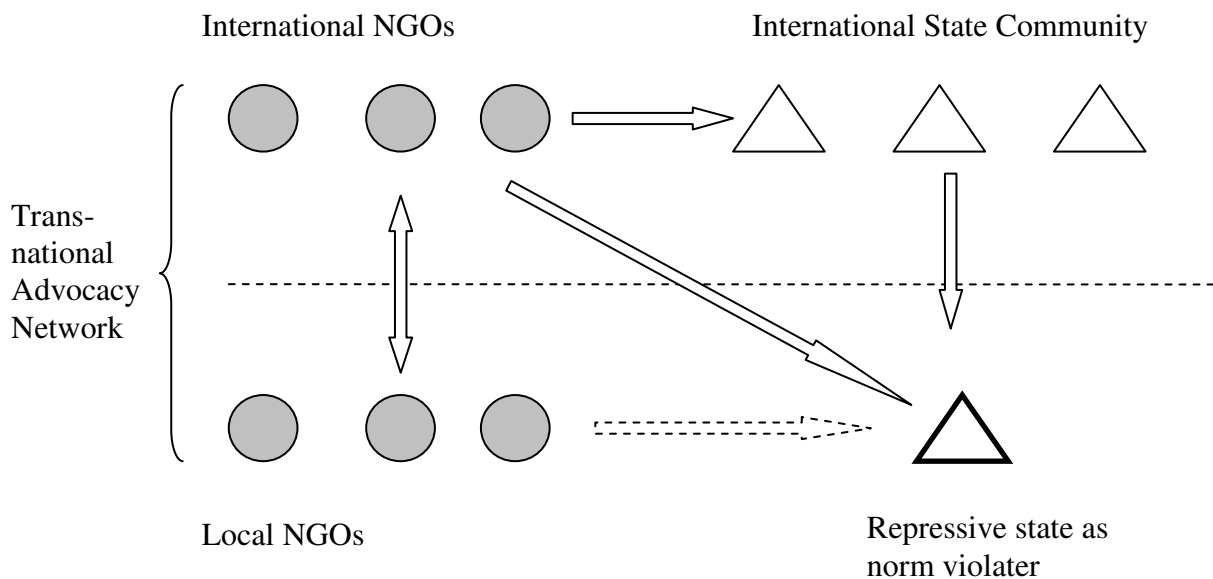
<sup>6</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink (1998:896f.) describe "norm entrepreneurs" as actors who are transmitting norms because "norms do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behaviour in their community".

<sup>7</sup> Epistemic communities are defined according to Adler/Haas (1992:374f., 388f.) and Haas (1992:3) as "a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area".

<sup>8</sup> Size and strengths of a transnational advocacy network is measured by Keck and Sikkink (1998) by the absolute number and size of the organisations of the network.

<sup>9</sup> The classical definition of "vulnerability" by Keohane and Nye (1989:13) is: "vulnerability can be defined as an actor's liability to suffer costs imposed by external events even after policies have been altered".

**Picture 1: The transnational advocacy network**



Important to note are the different strategies the actors of the transnational advocacy network employ to transfer and enforce a norm. While the spiral model mainly envisages norm entrepreneurs to use a mixture of pressure and shaming tactics, other norm advocacy strategies like information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics and accountability politics (Keck/Sikkink 1998:6) are also possible. Which strategy is chosen and which proves most successful depends on the framing of the topic under discussion,<sup>10</sup> the campaigning history of the norm entrepreneur and the domestic institutional conditions of the country under consideration. For example, climate change framed either as an environmental or as an energy issue appeals to different audiences and calls for different types of actions.

## 2. Introduction to the spiral model of transnational norm diffusion

The so called “spiral model” has been developed as “a theory of the stages and mechanisms through which international norms can lead to changes in behaviour“ (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:2) in order to explain the influence of international norms on national politics of human rights. Because we can also identify norms in the field of environmental politics, it seems plausible to transfer the model from the human rights to the environmental politics field. This should be also in the sense of its developers as they state that the model could be used for any socio-political processes of change involving norms independent from its geographical region and its national settings.<sup>11</sup> An application of the spiral model to the politics of environmental protection can be a helpful step in the generation of a theory of international socialisation, which is still a desideratum in International Relations.<sup>12</sup> If the spiral model proves to be transferable to the field of environmental politics, its theoretical assumptions are strengthened, its scope for applicability broadened and thereby its explanatory power becomes increased.

Starting from the research interest to explain the variance of changes in human rights politics on the national state level, the spiral model is developed in order to track how socialisation and norm internalisation might work in practice. According to Risse et al. the process of norm internalisation can be divided in different forms of interaction between the norm-violating

<sup>10</sup> Keck/Sikkink 1998:5 define “framing” as “a conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action”.

<sup>11</sup> Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:238.

<sup>12</sup> Schimmelfennig (1994:336) defines socialisation as one of the basic concepts of socio-political research that has been so far neglected in political science theory-building.

state and the norm entrepreneurs. In the beginning, the norm internalisation process is dominated by strategic bargaining and instrumental adaptation. This form of interaction is displaced by moral conscious building, argumentation and communicative persuasion processes. The last form of interaction takes place as an institutionalisation and habitualisation of the norm. The process of norm internalisation is concluded if the compliance with the norm is independent from individual beliefs of actors.

Based on these assumptions about different modes of interaction, Risse et al. develop a “spiral model” which includes five different phases of interaction between the state and the norm entrepreneurs. These five phases are in principle sequential to each other, but may overlap in practice. In each phase, a special form of interaction between the repressive state and the norm entrepreneurs is assumed leading each to an increased level of norm internalisation and compliance.

1. *Phase – repression and activation of network.* Facing a strong violation of a behavioural norm, a transnational network of actors may form that support the norm against its violator. Once the transnational network of norm entrepreneurs is activated, it is able to put the norm-violating state on the international agenda. Pressure tactics are used to force the repressive state into dialogue by imposing material pressure e.g. in form of trade sanctions, or/and by imposing social pressure, e.g. by shaming-tactics. It is assumed that the target state will respond with instrumental adaptation.

*Hypothesis for the transition to phase 2:* Only if and when the transnational advocacy network succeeds in gathering sufficient information on the norm-violation by the “target state,” it can put the norm-violating state on the international agenda moving the situation to phase 2 (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:22).

2. *Phase – denial.* Domestic norm entrepreneurs enter the scene and lobby together with their international counterparts for the norm under consideration. In this phase, denial of the validity of the norm is seen as progress as it signals the target state starts to be involved in a form of dialogue. Entering a dialogue might be either motivated by states that are socially vulnerable as their reputation as a member of the international state community is generally weak or by states that seek to maximize their interests, e.g. if they receive aid from countries advocating the norms under consideration.

*Hypothesis for the transition to phase 3:* If the strength of the transnational advocacy network and the vulnerability of the target state facing international pressure is big enough, the target state gives first tactical concessions (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:24).

3. *Phase – tactical concessions.* This phase is characterised by rhetoric and practical norm acknowledgements by the target state. Due to this – in most cases tactical – concessions, a “window of opportunity” is opened for the transnational advocacy network to increase its pressure. Once trapped in its rhetorical norm acknowledgements, the state has to continue on the involuntarily chosen path of norm internalisation if the transnational advocacy network is able to uphold its domestic and international norm advocacy.

*Hypothesis for the transition to phase 4:* If faced with a fully mobilized domestic opposition linked up with transnational networks for which the norm under consideration has reached consensual status, norm-violating governments no longer have many choices and usually become “self-entrapped” into argumentative behaviour in favour of the norm (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:28).

4. *Phase – prescriptive status.* This phase describes a situation in which the target state justifies its own behaviour according of the disputed norm, so that its validity is no longer disputed, even if norm violations might still happen in some cases (Rittberger 1993:10-12). One difficulty in identifying this phase is the problem of how to distinguish norm internalisation by real persuasion and by rhetorical and instrumental adaptation. Risse et

al. take a pragmatic view by arguing that true beliefs of actors are not relevant as long as the actors are consistent in their verbal utterances and their words and deeds ultimately match (Risse/Ropp/Sikkink 1999:29).

*Hypothesis for the transition to phase 5:* If the pressure from “below” (by the domestic civil society) and from “above” (by the transnational advocacy network) stays constant, the target state is made to hold on to its concessions leading to long-term norm-consistent behaviour.

5. *Phase – rule-consistent behaviour.* If the pressure from international and national norm entrepreneurs is hold up, the final state of the socialisation process will be reached, whereby international norms are fully institutionalized domestically and norm compliance becomes a habitual practice of actors and is enforced by the rule of law.

The authors of the spiral model give several intervening variables that might influence the socialisation process. For the present analysis of climate change politics, only one of them – “world time” – is relevant.<sup>13</sup> it describes the intervening impact of the international cascade of a norm upon the national level. If an international norm is followed by an increasing number of members of the international community, the ease and likeability of becoming internalised by any other state increases.

### **3. Applying the spiral model to environmental politics**

Whether the spiral model fits as an explanation for behavioural change not only in the field of human rights but also in the field of climate politics depends on whether a similar norm intensity and similar actor constellation can be detected.

For a long time conflicts in the field of environmental politics have been primarily discussed as interests and distribution conflicts about absolute and relative goods with “tragedies of the commons”<sup>14</sup> and “collective action problems”<sup>15</sup> being the keywords of the debate. Like in other fields of politics the shortcomings of such rationalist approaches lie in their inability to explain a change in behaviour due to the change of norms. Rationalist approaches are also facing the difficulty to explain the creation and change of preferences in the field of environmental politics (Jachtenfuchs 1996:426). An increasing number of authors are now looking at the impact of international and national norms as reasons behind actions taking in environmental politics (e.g. Brühl 2000, Keck/Sikkink 1998; Stokke 1998; Ulbert 1997; Wapner 2000). Especially for the explanation of a long-term change of national and international behaviour in the field of environmental politics, an explanatory approach focused on the internalisation of norms seems fruitful.

If one compares different cascades of norms with each other, the norm of environmental protection has surely been one of the most prominent in the last decades.<sup>16</sup> Environmental protection can be regarded as an integrated part of the international agenda since 1972 when

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<sup>13</sup> Other intervening variables identified by Risse/Ropp/Sikkink (1999:260ff.) are “blocking factors” on the domestic level like religious groups and “societal openness to external processes of argumentation and persuasion” which is a rather vague concept of the cultural and institutional ability of a national society to react to external influences.

<sup>14</sup> „Tragedies of the common“ describes a situation in which damage caused by the action of one actor to the whole community surpasses the utility of the action for the actor causing it (Hardin 1968).

<sup>15</sup> „Collective action problems“ exist when a cooperative solution to a problem be beneficial to all actors but would open the possibility for one or several actors to freeride on the actions (and costs) carried out by only a few actors.

<sup>16</sup> In order to speak of a „norm cascade“, Finnemore/Sikkink (1998:901) ask for at least 1/3 of countries acknowledging the specific norm, while Boekle/Wagner/Rittberger (2001:76) call for a majority of norm subscribers as the tipping point.



the UN Conference on the Human Environment made protection and improvement of the environment a duty of every government.<sup>17</sup> Since then the norm of environmental protection experienced changes in its meaning and behavioural consequences: In the beginning, the classical environmental politics did not draw a connection between the environment and economics and was focused on the “end-of-pipe”-solutions (Carter 2001). Latest with scientific publications such as the Brundland report “Our common future”, the linkage and interdependence between human (economic) actions and the ecosystem became widely known and entered the political discussions.<sup>18</sup> The norm of “environmental protection” has experienced another broadening in its meaning, when the demand for more environmental protection by developed countries and the demand for a “right for social and economic development”<sup>19</sup> of developing countries have been merged into the concept of “sustainable development”<sup>20</sup>. This consensus has become the overarching norm guiding international debate about environmental and development issues since its inscription in the Rio Declaration of 1992 by the majority of countries worldwide.

In analogy to the norm “environmental protection”, the closely linked norm of “climate protection” has experienced a comparable norm cascade and a change of its meaning and implications. Climate protection became first widely recognized on the first World Climate Conference in 1979. Climate change had been first discussed within epistemic communities and only until recently a consensus about its anthropogenic causes has been reached, however, with important players like the US administration still in doubt. One of the most striking differences when comparing human rights politics and environmental/climate politics is the role of science. In the field of human rights, appropriateness of behaviour, but hardly knowledge shapes a norm. In the field of environmental and climate politics, it is due to the cause-effect-relationships detected by natural science that climate change has become a social and political problem (Carter 2001:164ff.). Thus one can expect that epistemic communities have a larger role to play in climate politics than in the human rights field. Technical aspects, complexity and interdependence with many other political fields require a special framing for climate politics which is not only based on norms, but also on information. The complexity of the issue demands for new strategies for climate advocacy groups: information sharing and knowledge building about long cause-effect relationships might contribute more to a re-framing of climate issues than a mere reference to already established norms by shaming and pressurizing tactics.

### ***III. Case study: Explaining national change in Chinese climate politics***

#### **1. Applying the spiral model to climate politics in China**

The People’s Republic of China is a prominent example for national politics that reflect a rivalry between national and international norms. It thereby fulfils also the two criteria given by Risse et al. (1999:273) needed for the applicability of the spiral model in other political fields: First, a state needs to adhere to a particular set of public norms that have become embedded in its laws, institutions, and policies; and second, these state norms need to be

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<sup>17</sup> Declaration of the Conference on the Human Environment, article 1, paragraph 1, Stockholm, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> Meyer/Frank/Hironaka/Schofer/Tuma (1997:630) explain the increased regulation in the field of environmental politics by the worldwide expansion of scientific discourse.

<sup>19</sup> Central document the Founex Report, in which developing countries already in 1971 demand for a linkage between the debate on environmental protection and the debate on development (Williams 1993:15).

<sup>20</sup> The most common definition of „sustainable development“ has its origin in the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987:43): „sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs“.

challenged by a contradictory set of international norms promoted by an emerging transnational advocacy network. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 politicians have advocated a development strategy of quantitative, resource-intensive growth. Within this development strategy, the environment was understood to supply inexhaustible resources and any environmental pollution was regarded as an externality and an unavoidable side effect of economic growth. Typical slogans of the Maoist campaigns were e.g. "Chairman Mao's thoughts are our guide to scoring victories in the struggle against nature" or "The united will of the people can transform nature" (Hallding 1991). As outlined before, the contrasting international norm of "environmental protection" can be regarded as international consensus since 1972, the norm of "climate protection" has occurred on the political agenda since 1979. Therefore it makes sense to start the analysis of the Chinese climate politics – embedded in the overarching field of energy and environmental politics - since that date in order to trace changes in behaviour and impacts of the transnational advocacy network with the help of the spiral model.

## **2. Process analysis of the impact of the transnational advocacy network on the Chinese climate change politics**

### *1. Phase of repression (1949 – 1987)*

At the end of the 1970s, when the topic of climate change was first raised on the international agenda, China had been in a state of struggle against nature since almost three decades. The Maoist resentment against nature can be partly explained by Confucian tradition<sup>21</sup>, partly by the communist credo that environmental problems are the creations of capitalist countries and are by definition not existent in China (Ross 1988:8; Duan/Yang/Gao 2000:7). Driven by the urge for economic growth, energy prices were heavily subsidized (Hatch 2001:9) leading to a doubling of energy demand in comparison to economic growth in the period 1949-1979 (Levine 1999:6). One can therefore conclude that the national norm of how to approach natural and energy resources was in stark contrast to the emerging international norm of climate protection which calls for a sustainable use of natural and especially energy resources.

On the international stage, China did not participate in the first World Climate Conference in 1979. However, China did send a delegation to the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, where Chinese delegates voiced their opinion that communist countries do not face any environmental problems, while they blamed imperialist countries for their resource exploitation. The delegates reinforced their demand that the international norm of "sovereignty with no interference in internal affairs" should be applied to environmental matters as well (Ross 1988:137; Bechert 1995:93f.).

China's official stand in environmental negotiations changed slightly in 1973 with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai opening China's first National Environmental Conference; according to Economy (1997:22) the Prime Minister had been impressed by the report of the UN Conference on the Human Environment. On the second National Environmental Conference, members of the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) called for a drastic emission reduction in soot and sulphur dioxide to avoid further air pollution (Ross 1988:143).

### *2. Phase of denial (1987 – 1990)*

In 1987 the first sign of engagement in the international debate on climate change can be detected for China: on August 19<sup>th</sup> an agreement between the US Department of Energy and the Chinese Academy of Science was signed for a joined research program about the impacts of carbon dioxide on climate change. As a consequence of this agreement, the USA-PRC

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<sup>21</sup> Confucianism regards nature basically as in a utilitarian fashion (Shapiro 2001:6).

Committee for the Joint Study of Global Change was founded and put into practice by exchange of scientists. In contrast to the causal mechanisms set forward by the spiral model, not advocacy organisations but scientists were the first to bring the topic of climate change on the Chinese agenda. This can be partly explained by the issue itself, partly by the still lacking strength of the transnational advocacy network in the 1970s.

In line with the bilateral scientific exchange, a Chinese National Climate Committee was founded in 1987 to coordinate Chinese research and to examine the effects of a possible climate change for China (Wu/He/Fan/Zhao 1998:543). China even took part in the first meeting of the International Panel on Climate Change, but still denied all responsibility and need for action (Economy 1997:29). Shortly before the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Climate Conference in 1990, an internal debate started about China's official position: voices were divided between the conservative Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Planning Commission and the Energy Ministry and the rather progressive representatives of the State Science and Technology Commission and the NEPA. While arguments on the conservative side reflected the traditional line, voices from the progressive fraction for the first time raised the factor of a possible image boost by a constructive Chinese position which the country was in need of after its heavy loss of reputation due to the 1989 Tiananmen incident.<sup>22</sup> The debate was further intensified by the results of the report of working group II of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which placed China among the most vulnerable countries to climate change, but also listed possible positive effects for agriculture yields in Northern China. The debate was ultimately decided by the interference of Deng Xiaoping, Leader of the Communist Party of China, and Li Peng, Premier of the State Council, who favoured the conservative position that regarded energy security as China's utmost priority.<sup>23</sup> The phase of denial ends with China's signature of the Montreal Protocol for the Protection of the Ozone Layer in 1990. This signature can be seen as the first cooperative move of the Chinese government to contribute to the international endeavour of climate protection. This transition from the phase of denial to the phase of tactical concessions cannot be explained by the actions of the transnational advocacy network (which at that time did not work in or on China). Instead, information shared by scientists about possible negative outcomes of a climate change for China and China's urge for an improved image on the international stage can be detected as the main driving factors.

### *3. Phase of tactical concessions (1991 – 1996)*

On the international level, China began to switch to an active role in the climate negotiations, hosting the Beijing Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in developing countries, 18 – 19 June 1991. Focus of this conference was indeed a debate on norms: “to discuss challenges of the international community with the establishment of norms of cooperation for the environment and development and their consequences for developing countries...” (Beijing Rundschau 25/1992:11). However, the Declaration of the Beijing Conference still reflects the traditional viewpoint of the developing countries that climate change is the sole responsibility of developed countries and developing countries should not face any demands for action for climate protection. The consolidation of the developing countries' positions can be regarded as one prime purpose of the conference with developing countries now speaking on behalf of the “Group 77 and China” with China no more being in an isolationist position (Economy 1997:34). There was however a switch from an opportunistic position towards a pragmatic position of the middle ground signalling some willingness to cooperate, which became apparent in official rhetoric: in their speeches during

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<sup>22</sup> This assumption is shared by e.g. Lin (1995:4), Johnston (1998:558), Hatch (2001:22f.).

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Huang Yicheng, Minister for Energy in 1990, argued: „China wants to double its GNP by the year 2000. It therefore will have to be producing 1.4 billion tons of coal and 200 million tons of petroleum” (Economy 1997:28).

the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, Li Peng, Prime Minister of the State Council, and Song Jian, Leader of NEPA, both stressed China's willingness to take up responsibility for climate protection. Both presented environmental politics as being part of China's basic state politics, but also named economic development and the sovereign use of resources as China's utmost priorities (Beijing Rundschau 25/1992:7ff). China signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as the 10<sup>th</sup> country and ratified the convention on 2 November 1992. However, the fact that the State Meteorological Agency was assigned as the implementing agency reflects the Chinese handling of the climate change issue merely as a natural science phenomenon and not as a political problem with severe social and economic consequences. The UNCED brought another boost of prestige in environmental politics for China: it was the first country who published its Agenda 21. In the articles related to climate protection, China for the first time announced internationally several domestic measures planned for the employment of cleaner energy technologies and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Concerning the main objective of the Agenda 21 – the inclusion of civil society organisations in environmental governance – the Chinese report stays vague, putting emphasis mainly on environmental education in schools. Rhetorically, however, the Chinese Agenda 21 embraces the concept of sustainable development as a new moral standard and restates China's responsibility and determination in environmental politics.<sup>24</sup>

On the national level, the 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plan (1991-1995) includes for the first time the term "climate change" when it calls for a research project on the "changes in the life-supporting environment in the next 20 to 50 years" (CSCPRC 1992:16). Indeed, the early 1990s saw an incorporation of environmental and climate issues on the national policy level: new rules and regulations – for the first time taking up the "polluter pays"-principle – were passed to control air pollution and a white book on the environment was published (Nielsen/McElroy 1998:20; Lin 1998:18). In order to strengthen "eco-business" in China, 2500 actors of the environmental industry were invited for a first national meeting (Bechert 1995:182; Zhou 1997) and the development of the environmental business was declared a national priority in 1994 (China's Agenda 21, Article 2.19.).

Concerning the participation of civil society in the Chinese environmental and climate politics, two trends were identifiable for the early 1990s. First, the Chinese government launched educational campaigns to strengthen the public's environmental awareness and knowledge: worldwide environmental events like e.g. Earth Day, the World Environmental Day, or China specific activities like the "bird loving week" or the "China Century Tour on Environmental Protection" became introduced. Also the media coverage of official environmental activities and conferences became enhanced by the press campaign "Environmental Campaigns to the New Century" (Wen 1998:39). Second, the first domestic environmental NGOs appeared on the Chinese scene. The rules for the establishment and the registration for non-governmental organisations (in China called "social organisations" or "public non-profit organisations") originating from 1989 were revised twice, in 1996 and

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<sup>24</sup> Chinas Agenda 21, Article 20.75.: "The new moral standard requires that the concept of sustainable development should be taken as the basis of judgement, and the human race as a whole should be the main object of consideration in the evaluation of any policy-decision...what we mean by environment is not only that within the boundaries of a nation, but the global environment. The new code of conduct renders the science and technology sector society's conscience, pushing it to follow the dictates of sustainable development"; Chinas Agenda 21, Artikel 1.7.: "...the prompt formulation and implementation of China's Agenda 21 are also important aspects of China's deepening of reforms and opening to the outside world. It also reflects the Chinese Government's strong sense of historical mission and responsibility and its determination to share its international obligations and make greater contributions to humankind".

1998, not necessarily easing the initiation of NGOs. In 1993, the “Friends of Nature” were founded as a nature conservation organisation having about 400 members of whom most are journalists, teachers and scientists. The “Global Village Beijing”, founded in 1994, has become renown on a national basis due to its own TV programmes on environmental issues. The organisation has been appointed as the “GEF NGO Regional Focal Point” in 1998 and hosted the first environmental roundtable meeting in July 1998 for a discussion among Chinese NGO leaders and President Bill Clinton. Direct relevance for climate protection has the organisation “Beijing Energy Efficiency Center”, which had been already founded in 1993 with support of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Battelle-Pacific Northwest National Laboratories and the China Energy Research Institute (Price 1998:8).

Within science, many exchange programmes and events took place in the 1990s, often sponsored and organised by not only scientific institutes but also by international NGOs.<sup>25</sup> The UNCED had brought another stimulus for the debate about the appropriate path for China’s development. With arguments ranging from deep ecology to “no interference in sovereign matters”, the debate within academia tended towards a more sustainable development strategy.<sup>26</sup> Even if most articles opted for a sustainable development strategy out of reasons of national interest, e.g. a decoupling of economic growth from energy demand would lead to improved energy security; some scientists also stressed the responsibility of China as a growing super power to take up its part in for the solution of global environmental problems. This shift of opinion within the Chinese academia can be attributed to their increasing cooperation with international epistemic communities working on the climate issue. Information and arguments provided by the international scientific community has helped to frame the climate issue in a way conducive to Chinese scientists and decision-makers, of which some had become increasingly aware of the deteriorating state of the Chinese environment and its consequences for the overall well-being of the country. The intersection between the Chinese epistemic communities and political decision-makers is nevertheless hard to follow from the outside, but China experts agree that the flow of information and arguments between the two communities can be considered high and influential on policy making (Lehrack 2004:20).

The phase of tactical concessions ends with the inscription of a sustainable development path in the 9<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plan (1996-2000), which makes environmental protection a national priority, and thus takes - at least on paper – the turn from a strategy of economic growth at all means to a strategy of sustainable economic growth decoupled from energy consumption and natural resource exploitation. Goals for environmental protection were set high, e.g. solving China’s environmental problems until 2010, and finance was supposed to be raised from 0.7% to 1.3% of GDP (Betke 1998:355). Even if the situation today shows that statements – be they as official as a Five-Year-Plan – were too ambitious to be fully realised, the principle of “sustainable development” has become incorporated into national discourse and regulation, therefore fulfilling the indicator identified in the spiral model for a norm having reached “prescriptive status”.

#### *4. Phase of prescriptive status (1996 -*

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<sup>25</sup> E.g. WWF organized an international seminar in China on global warming (Johnston 1998:571); a UN conference was held on the topic of „coal consumption“; the Climate Institute coordinated a meeting between Chinese and international scientists (CSCPCC 1992:190); and representatives of the Chinese State Science Commission cooperated with the UN Centre for Science and Technology Development (Bechert 1995:170; Johnston 1998:571).

<sup>26</sup> Different positions on the question of whether to substitute the traditional Chinese development model with a model of sustainable development can be found e.g. in Wang/Huang 1995; Xiao 1995; Cai 1997; Zhao 1998; Liu 1995.

Although there is not much change in the Chinese official position in international negotiations for the Kyoto Protocol - China in line with other developing countries is not willing to take up any legally binding GHG emission reduction commitments – China is increasing its consideration of climate protection measures on the national level. In the Five-Year-Guidelines since 1996 include environmental and climate protection measures. Cornerstones of the objectives with direct linkages to climate protection are: First, the goal of the 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Guideline (2006-2010) to increase the energy efficiency of production by 20% in the next five years; and second, the target to increase the share of renewable energies in China's electricity generation from 8% in 2005 to 10% in 2010 and 16% in 2020 (Zhang 2005). The coming into force of the Chinese law for the promotion of renewable energies on 1 January 2006 is also an indicator that the norm of "climate protection" becomes inscribed in national law. In addition, governmental institutions with relevance for climate governance have been upgraded, e.g. the former National Environmental Protection Agency has been turned into the State Environmental Protection Agency which now enjoys ministerial status.

A mobilization of civil society for environmental and climate protection by NGOs is often supported and sometimes even financed by the Chinese government when this is seen as supportive to government measures. For example, the coverage of environmental matters is backed up in the mass media in order to make the public aware of environmental campaigns, laws and publications. Civil involvement in environmental matters is not necessarily seen any more as a suspicious form of political behaviour but as a needed function of civil society as a watch dog to monitor implementation of national environmental regulations on the local level (Ma/Ortolano 2000:74). What is not taken up by the government controlled media however is a critical assessment of official environmental campaigns. At that point, INGOs try to back up critical journalists by creating international recognition for their work: for example, Friends of the Earth Hong Kong assign annually since 1996 their "Earth Award" for the best journalistic contributions on environmental issues (Wen 1998:44). Besides INGOs, international donor organisations are supporting Chinese NGOs by financial means: for example, the World Bank has supported a two-year-training programme for the China NGO network (Odgen/Fong 2002:6ff.). "Environmental NGO Fairs" do also contribute to the transnational integration of Chinese NGOs by providing information and a network for best practices of organisation, project implementation and financing.<sup>27</sup> Giving out awards for achieved targets and honourable deeds is one of the main backbones of the Chinese political system. Since the 1990s awarding good practices has become used in environmental politics as well: Every year the Chinese government awards ten citizens who have been most vigilant in the preservation of China's natural environment with a prize of 10.000 CNY [approx. 986 Euros, 07.03.2007] each.

A new form of cooperation is flourishing in China in the beginning of the new millennium – mirroring worldwide developments: NGOs are increasingly cooperating with business actors for environmental and clean energy issues. NGOs support the development of clean energy industries with research, demonstration projects, commercialisation of new technologies, lobbying for product standards and by campaigns for a better consumer awareness of climate and environmentally friendly products. For example, WWF is conducting its own pilot project "Dunhuang 8 MW Photovoltaic Merged Grid Power Generation System Research Project" as a demonstration of photovoltaic technology, assists the Chinese government in drafting of policies supporting the commercialization of renewable energies and helps in building

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<sup>27</sup> The first „Environmental NGO Fair“ was organised in September 2001 for 50 representatives of Chinese environmental organisations. The forum has been sponsored by the US Embassy, American NGOs like Environmental Defense Fund, international NGOs like WWF, and multinational companies like Shell and British Petroleum (Beijing Environment, Science and Technology Update, US Embassy Beijing, 02.11.2001).

mechanisms and capacities for the support of the emerging industry for renewable energies. Similar as with other environmental issues, NGOs in the field of climate politics predominantly take the role of an educator of consumers.<sup>28</sup> One of the best examples for the coordinated work of Chinese NGOs in the field of raising consumers' awareness for the topic of climate change and of influencing their individual behaviour is the "26 Degree Campaign". China usually experiences a peak in electricity consumption in the summer months when air conditioners run full power to cool down hotels, offices and private homes. The "26 Degree Campaign" was initiated in the summer of 2004 by six Chinese NGOs<sup>29</sup> asking public and private enterprises and individuals to set their air conditioners to a minimum of 26 degrees. The difference of two degrees to a usual 24 degree cooling can save 400 to 600 million kilowatts of electricity, which would have been produced with 160,000 to 250,000 tons of coal according to the NGOs. The successful "26 Degree Campaign" had thus saved 350,000 to 550,000 tons of carbon dioxide.<sup>30</sup>

What can be observed as well is a "sectoral diversification" among Chinese NGOs, with some of them becoming specialists on issues such as energy, urban transport, grasslands, and forestry certification, which can be interpreted as a sign of growing maturity among Chinese NGOs (China Development Brief 2007).

#### *5. Phase of norm-consistent behaviour*

Even if the trend in Chinese climate politics goes toward internalisation of the norm "climate protection", the phase of norm-consistent behaviour is not yet reached as several indicators, e.g. a mechanisms for citizens to complain about norm-inconsistent behaviour, is not yet established. The process tracing of events has shown that the norm of "climate protection" is closely embedded in the norm of "sustainable development". Thus, one can say that as long as the overarching norm of "sustainable development" is not fully internalised and incorporated into actions, the norm of "climate protection" will not be dominant in leading behaviour. This delay in the norm internalisation by China is not surprising as it simply reflects the delays in the cascade of the international norm "climate protection". At that point, the intervening variable of the spiral model "world time" can partly explain why the internalisation of the norm "climate protection" has so far only reached the "prescriptive status" in China.

### **Discussion of results**

The process analysis of Chinese climate politics has shown two main discrepancies between the case study and the assumptions of the spiral model: First, there has been – besides some conditioning of developmental aid of GEF and other donor organisations – hardly any form of pressurizing of the Chinese government by the transnational advocacy network to become more committed to climate protection. Second, especially in beginning, epistemic communities and not INGOs were the most active and influential on the Chinese position towards climate politics. Thus, the socialisation process has relied more on the diffusion of knowledge and arguments than on pressure and shaming tactics. In contrast to the human rights cases presented by Risse et al., there have not been open clashes between the Chinese government and the transnational advocacy network, instead cooperation and consultation have been the main paths leading to a norm internalisation. Due to this observation one could assume that the Chinese government was not that reluctant to the norm "climate protection"

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<sup>28</sup> For more information see: [www.wwfchina.org/aboutwwf/whatwedo/climate/eclean.shtml](http://www.wwfchina.org/aboutwwf/whatwedo/climate/eclean.shtml) (in Chinese).

<sup>29</sup> WWF ([www.wwfchina.org](http://www.wwfchina.org)), Global Village Beijing ([www.gvbchina.org](http://www.gvbchina.org)), CANGO ([www.cango.org](http://www.cango.org)), Friends of Nature ([www.fon.org.cn](http://www.fon.org.cn)), Institute of Environment and Development ([www.fdi.ngo.cn](http://www.fdi.ngo.cn)), and Green Earth Volunteers ([www.chinagev.org](http://www.chinagev.org)).

<sup>30</sup> Xinhua (27.06.2004): "26-degree Campaign" saves energy in Beijing. Available at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/27/content\\_343184.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/27/content_343184.htm) [23.01.07]

after it had learned about its possible negative consequences for China. Speaking of a learning process might therefore be a more appropriate description of a process in which the target state was at least partly voluntarily getting involved in dialogue and action about climate protection especially after it learned that this would be in its interest.<sup>31</sup>

Advocacy actors in the field of climate politics differ therefore slightly from actors in the human rights field: epistemic communities are more decisive in counselling political decision-makers and the general public about cause-effect-relationships, while international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) take the role of informers but also advocates in spreading knowledge and pressuring for actions (Brunnengräber/Walk 2000; Newell 2000). However, while a differentiation between scientific and advocacy actors makes sense for a sound methodology, in practice, both groups often overlap in strategies as well as in personnel (Breitmeier/Rittberger 2000:143). This difference in the issue itself, its advocates and their strategies partly explains why we observe a more benevolent relationship in climate politics between the target state and the transnational advocacy network in comparison to the human rights field. One more difference between the two fields of politics is worth noting for the application of the spiral model: the implicit linkage between norm-compliance and removal of state repression of domestic civil society actors given in the human rights field is not necessarily the case in the field of climate politics. A state might give in to demands of climate advocacy groups, but must not necessarily make their political stand easier. Quite on the contrary, good environmental governance can even increase the power of the repressive regime as environmental benefits are often acknowledged by citizens with support of the government. However, the fact that repression of civil society groups is existent in a country explains why only their cooperation with international advocacy groups can bring enough pressure and arguments to change a repressive government's behaviour in climate politics.

#### ***IV. Conclusion: Environmental politics as a research desideratum for theories of socialisation***

The spiral model has been applied as a possible causal explanation for the impact of a transnational advocacy network on national politics involving values. Drawing on the constructivist approach to international relations, the model assumed that a norm internalisation as part of a socialisation process of a state into an international norm community can explain the change in behaviour. As the field of environmental and climate politics involves norms which can be detected at the international and national level, the spiral model, which had been originally developed for the human rights field, was adapted and applied to a new field of politics. Using process analysis the change in Chinese climate politics was traced and the roles and impacts of different actors in different phases identified. The result of the case study is that the “prescriptive status” of the norm “climate protection” has been reached in China despite the fact that several hypotheses derived from the spiral model could not be fully confirmed.

The transfer of the spiral model as an explanation for norm change in the human rights field to the field of environmental/climate politics has thus been only partly successful. “Social vulnerability” and the “urge for improving one's reputation” could be detected as factors motivating the Chinese government to switch to position more coherent to the international dominant norm. The analysis also confirmed the importance of transnational actors in putting the issue of “climate change” on the international as well as on the Chinese agenda. However,

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<sup>31</sup> „Complex learning“ would be a fitting concept to describe a learning process which took part in a situation of uncertainty in which the actor is neither sure about its own identity (e.g. which role do I take facing the problem of global warming) nor values guiding its behaviour (e.g. do I apply norms from environmental, energy or economic politics) (further discussed in Checkel 2000:1134; Finnemore/Sikkink 1998:908; Levy 1994:286).



two of the fundamental assumption of the spiral model could not be confirmed: neither did the transnational advocacy network use pressurizing tactics nor have INGOs been the main actors leading to a behavioural change of the Chinese government. Instead epistemic communities have been the main actors who redefined the Chinese attitude towards climate change via a transmission of causal knowledge about the negative consequences of climate change: in the beginning, the issue of climate protection was considered to be just another instrument of western colonialism; in the end, the transnational cooperation had helped to realize that measures for climate protection are ultimately in the national interest of China. The process seemed to resemble a learning process, in which mainly epistemic communities were using information and persuasion tactics to enable the target state to learn voluntarily about the positive effects of adhering to the norm of climate protection. This result can be partly explained by the issue of climate protection itself: due to its complexity and the situation of uncertainty for the actors facing global warming, the issue is prone for the role of epistemic communities and their strategies of information sharing. The result can also be explained by the particular case of China: NGOs with a focus on the environmental and especially on climate change are still comparatively rare and young. Like most other Chinese NGOs, Chinese environmental NGOs usually take a cooperative rather than an adversarial/confrontational stance vis-versa the government, thus using informational and supportive strategies rather than pressurizing and shaming tactics as employed by NGOs in Western countries.

For the international community in advocacy of a certain norm, the experiences made in the Chinese climate politics seem to recommend that a change in behaviour guided by norms can be best attained if the target state is convinced and not forced into the internalisation of the norm. But persuasion power certainly has a limit. In the case of climate protection, the international as well as the Chinese cascade of the norm “climate protection” has found its limits so far in the debate about the appropriate level of economic development: as long as measures for climate protection have positive effects for economic development or at least pose “no regrets“ options, governments are keen to position themselves as climate protectors - as soon as norms narrow the corridor of action towards measures with negative effects on the economy, enthusiasm for climate protection is severely restricted.

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