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Communicating Shark Extinction: Celebrity-endorsed conservation campaigns and public policy in China

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The jury remains out on whether celebrity-endorsed environmental communication has a demonstrated positive impact in creating interested publics and transforming public policy agendas (Duthie, Veríssim, Keane, & Knight, 2017). Supporters argue that leveraging "fame" raises public awareness of environmental issues and organizations, as well as highlighting the need for legislative change, by generating media publicity, clarifying campaign issues, and attracting new audiences and donors (https://wildaid.org). Critics counter that celebrity-fronted environmentalism is a self-serving celebrity branding exercise that oversimplifies issues by providing "spectacular enviro-tainment" (Goodman, 2013; Goodman, Littler, Brockington & Boykoff, 2016). They assert that celebrity endorsement turns such issues into sensationalist media spectacles, matters of fan identification, and individual consumer choices ("causumerism"), rather than treating them as "big" political issues.

Discussions of the efficacy of celebrity-endorsed environmental communication typically focus on Western contexts and with democratic governments and publics in mind. That invites the question of whether such communication can influence public policy elsewhere, as in Asian authoritarian government contexts, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose "huge environmental challenges are significant for us all" (Shapiro, 2012, p. 1).

WildAid, an international conservation organization, has used celebrities such as Shanghai-born Yao Ming, formerly a star player with the North American National Basketball Association, as the public face of communication aimed at ending the consumption of shark-fin soup in Chinese restaurants globally (https://wildaid.org). The soup is a luxury item consumed as a social event largely by ethnically Chinese people at banquets marking major occasions, such as Chinese New Year and weddings, and at government and corporate events. Originally served as a tribute to the Chinese emperor, shark-fin soup honored the emperor because of the risk and expense involved in catching a "fierce" wild animal and the belief that some of the animal's vitality gets conferred on those who eat its

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fins (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 763; see also Jarvis, 2019). Today, serving shark-fin soup honors a host and guests by confirming the host's wealth and intimating that sponsors paying for the banquet respect the guests.

WildAid (2018, p. 4) claims that 100 million sharks are killed annually, mainly for the shark-fin trade, but also for the growing shark-meat market. Overfishing threatens to destroy the balance of ocean marine life by placing multiple shark species at risk of extinction. Some are finned alive and then thrown back into the ocean to die because the fins have more commercial value than the rest of the shark. Yet shark fin reportedly has no flavor and contains toxins.

Using the now-standard marketing practices of international NGOs, WildAid has enlisted celebrity spokespeople to generate media publicity for its Shark Conservation Program, which advocates legislation to restrict shark fishing and tries to dissuade consumers from buying shark-fin products.

WildAid's shark conservation program is a translocal media strategy to connect and influence people around the world through the exchange of celebrity-endorsed information, ideas, and identities. The program communicates its core conservation message – "when the buying stops, the killing can too" – via multilingual broadcasts and social media. The celebrities who deliver this message have international, national, and local appeal.

The roll-out of specific campaigns mobilizes diverse networks of actors to transform government practices and individual behaviors, and it elicits different forms of sociability and community activity. These include expressions of cosmopolitan environmental awareness displayed through activism for anti-finning legislation and refusal to eat shark-fin dishes. However, other sentiments evoked by these campaigns are neither intended nor desirable. They include claims to the effect that "all Chinese go out of their way to eat endangered species because of superstitious health beliefs," and "all anti-shark finning activists are racist China bashers" (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 764).

WildAid's shark-protection campaign illustrates philosopher-linguist George Lakoff's claim that effective communication about new ideas of, and action on, the environment needs "coherent framing." Why does it matter how we "frame" the environment? Lakoff (2010) argues that people do not comprehend the meaning of "facts" directly; rather, they think via mostly unconscious (but socially variable) interpretive contexts that he calls "frames." Telling people "the facts" does not mean they will necessarily reach the "right conclusion"

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(pp. 72-73). Facts "will be ignored," unless they make sense in terms of culturally embedded systems of frames, which involve local institutions, industries, and practices (social roles, values, etiquette, etc.) (pp. 71-73 & 77). To be communicated successfully, "the facts" must be framed persuasively and coherently, without activating related counterarguments and established habits (pp. 72 & 79). Persuasive framing could involve using exemplary messengers, appropriate visuals, narratives that link frames and the message, framing issues in morally acceptable terms, and *never* repeating opposing arguments (pp. 79-80).

This chapter uses the concept of coherent framing to assess the efficacy of celebrity-fronted shark conservation campaigns in mainland China vis-à-vis "authoritarian environmentalism," a non-participatory approach to environmental policy formation and implementation (Gilley, 2012, p. 287). China is a focus of debate about the relative merits of "democratic versus authoritarian environmentalism" because of its comparatively rapid advances in government and public action on environmental concerns (Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012). Although the PRC's system of one-party rule ensured that the country had no independent NGO sector and ignored massive environmental degradation until recently, the government has the perceived capacity to implement environmental protection policies quickly. That is because – unlike Western governments – it does not need to accommodate the interests of high-consuming citizens as voters and can arguably ignore opposing business interests (Gilley, 2012, p. 288). A reported 80% decline in shark-fin imports to mainland China during 2012-2015 highlights this capacity. The decline was driven in part by NGO environmental communication, but also by top-down government austerity measures that resulted in a ban on shark-fin soup at state-sponsored banquets (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2019a, p. 15; WildAid, 2018, p. 4). Thus the example of shark conservation and China underscores Lakoff's lament that environmental action tends to focus on individual behavioral change rather than political action, when "[to] an enormous degree, governmental action outweighs and shapes individual actions" (2010, p. 77).

Statement of the problem

Why do we need effective environmental communication about shark conservation? The message that must be communicated is clear – a quarter of shark species are threatened with extinction due to overfishing primarily for the shark-fin trade, and the number of vulnerable species is likely to grow (Sadovy de Mitcheson et al., 2018, p. 116). This threat is

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underscored by the fact that an increasing number of species have been listed on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), Appendix II (Cardeñosa et al., 2018). CITES is an international agreement among governments and aims to ensure that trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

The shark trade as a whole is difficult to control because of limited knowledge of the increasingly globalized market in shark products (meat and fins), problems with trade reporting mechanisms, and limited law enforcement capability. Controls on the shark fin trade are further complicated by the large number of sharks caught as secondary catch, high prices created by consumer demand, and difficulties in identifying fins by species (Dent & Clarke, 2015, p. iv; Sadovy de Mitcheson et al., 2018, p. 118). Despite a rising number of countries' bans on shark finning, anti-finning legislation typically bans the practice of catching a shark solely for the purpose of harvesting its fins – the import and export of fins that are not attached to a shark is illegal; however, fins obtained from managed shark fisheries and shark species that are not protected can still be traded (Animal Welfare Institute, 2020; Guida, 2019; Schiffman et al., 2020, p. 2). The emergence of new markets for shark meat also means that pressure to improve international and national monitoring and regulatory systems must continue (Dent & Clarke, 2015, pp. 1-2; WildAid, 2018). Hence, for the foreseeable future conservation communication is likely to remain an integral part of efforts to reduce consumer demand and to attract support for policy change to place species and target controls on shark fishing and/or enforce existing bans.

Who are the world's largest importers of shark fins? The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive trade volume data. According to the FishStat Database (Global Fisheries Commodities Production and Trade), the five largest shark-fin importers, accounting for around 95% of average annual global imports during 2000-2017, were Hong Kong, Malaysia, China, Singapore, and Taiwan. However, China has dropped off the list, with Canada coming in at fifth place, based on the 2011-2017 figures (2019b).

The global market has been gauged historically with reference to statistics from Hong Kong, a major shark-fin trade hub (Cardeñosa, et al., 2018; Shea & To, 2017). Imports into Hong Kong halved between 2007 and 2017; the re-export of shark fins declined by three-

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quarters over the same period (WWF, n.d.). PRC government reports similarly report a sharp decline in imports of shark fins over 2012–2015 (Hofford, 2017; Shea & To, 2017, p. 333).

There are multiple reasons for the decline in the Hong Kong trade, and especially exports to China, not all of which bode well for shark survival (Dent & Clarke, 2015, pp. 6, 26 & 36-38; Eriksson & Clarke, 2015, p. 169; WildAid, 2018, p. 4). One factor is shifting trade dynamics due to the introduction of taxes on shark-fin imports to mainland China from Hong Kong following the PRC's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001. That increased the cost of processing shark fins in China for re-export. Shifting and emerging new markets, including increased domestic shark-meat production in China, and perhaps even reduced supplies of shark fins due to overfishing, also played a role. Other factors include growing conservation awareness, consumer backlash against artificial shark-fin products, increased regulation of finning and other trade bans (retailer and transportation boycotts), and curbs on government officials' expenditures in mainland China. Statistical measurement changes may also have contributed to the reported decline. Changes to Hong Kong trade classifications in 2012-2014 resulted in frozen shark fins being re-classified as frozen shark meat, and there may have been underreporting of some trade. Although scientists hypothesize that environmental communication has not played a major role in the decline in the Hong Kong shark-fin trade to date, they acknowledge that it is impossible to determine the relative importance of each of these factors (Eriksson & Clarke, 2015, p. 169).

Why was the mainland Chinese market for shark fins further suppressed after 2012? The two commonly cited reasons are: 1) celebrity-endorsed environmental communication by international conservation organizations educating people about the need to protect sharks; and 2) introduction of government anti-corruption and austerity measures in late 2012, accompanied by bans on consumption of high-end cuisine at official banquets, including dishes that contain shark fin (Jeffreys, 2016a; WildAid, 2018). International organizations such as WildAid and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) naturally attribute this drop to the success of their environmental communication, and only secondarily or possibly to the government ban (Kao, 2014; Jin shi yuchi, 2012; Yuan, 2012; WildAid, 2018). However, as the next section shows, government-led policy formation may also have played a major role.

Methods

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This chapter uses an illustrative case study, drawing on statistical data and media content analysis, to reveal the relationship between celebrity-endorsed shark protection campaigns and PRC government regulations exacerbating a decline in the demand for shark fins in China. Statistical data on annual shark-fin trade volumes in mainland China came from the FAO's FishStat Database.

Media analysis is a recognized way of observing environmental communication and related government, industry, NGO, and social networks (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). The author accessed English-language media content by searching for combinations of the keyword "shark fin" with, respectively, "Yao Ming," "WildAid," "public money," and "corruption" (that is, four combinations in total), after 2005 on Factiva.com an international news database produced by Dow Jones. Yao Ming signed a WildAid pledge not to eat shark fin in 2006 (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 766). The author accessed Chinese-language media content by searching for the same four combinations of the equivalent Chinese-language keywords (鱼翅 + 姚明, 野生救援, 公款, 腐败) on the China Core Newspaper Full-text Database of the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI) after 2005 (cnki.net). The study supplemented broadcast media content with searches for related content on Sina Weibo, a microblogging website and one of China's biggest social media platforms (weibo.com). However, the chapter emphasizes broadcast media content because only 10% of the Chinese population had internet access in 2006, and only half of the population had internet access in 2015 (Internet Live Stats, 2016). In comparing international NGO marketing and Chinese media content, the case study discusses contemporary mediatized environmental communication as a product of the often-unpredictable interactions among media, industry, NGO activism, and formal politics.

Findings

Table 1 shows change over time (2000-2017) in China's trade with the rest of the world in dried, prepared, and preserved shark fins, sourced from the FishStat Database (Global Fisheries Commodities Production and Trade) (2019b). Data on trade in fresh, chilled, and frozen shark fins are excluded due to apparent gaps in reporting. Overall, the data indicate that both exports and imports experienced a major decline beginning in the early 2000s, before the start of WildAid's China-focused shark conservation campaigns. However, imports declined much faster than exports, suggesting that China switched from being a net

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importer of shark-fin products to a net exporter during the 2010s. Numerous reasons may account for the dramatic (97%) decline in imports of shark fins to China from 2000 to 2011, including growing conservation awareness. However, it is striking that even after imports had already fallen to relatively low levels by the standards of the early 2000s from more than 4,000 metric tons (4 million kg) per annum to less than 200 (200,000 kg), they experienced a further 59% decline after 2011. It is plausible that bans on state-sponsored consumption of shark-fin dishes, which were announced in mid-2012 and introduced in late 2013, intensified the pre-existing downward trend in Chinese imports.

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Although the decline in imports could be interpreted as also indicating expansion of the Chinese domestic shark fin industry, the available evidence suggests otherwise. Despite the lack of official statistics on Chinese shark fin production, the FAO's Fishstat Database (Regional Capture Fisheries Statistics) sheds some light on Chinese shark capture numbers. For the seven species of shark with continuous captures figures available since 2007, the data show a pronounced decline in production in the late 2000s and relatively stable production since then. While not conclusive, the figures point to a decline in domestic consumption (rather than an expansion of domestic production) being the major factor behind the fall in shark fin imports. This inference is supported by a consumer behavior survey commissioned by WildAid, which reports a significant decline (more than 80%) in cities across China in shark fin sales by vendors and restaurants, and in people eating shark fin (partly due to concerns about fake products) (Whitcraft et al., 2014).

The available evidence suggests that consumer demand for shark fin remains low in China, even though shark conservation communication has diminished. WildAid (2011) achieved significant media exposure for its conservation communication. For example, it obtained over $200 million in pro-bono media support and reached more than 1 billion people in China in 2011 through advertising on satellite television and LCD screens on public transport and at shopping malls. However, the media response to WildAid's conservation communication was greater in international arenas than in China. A search for keywords "shark fin" and "Yao Ming," and "shark fin" and "WildAid," on Factiva.com between 2010 and 2012 – the height of the Yao Ming shark conservation campaign – produced 240 results

in total, while a Chinese-language search on the CNKI Database found 28 results for the same period, with numbers dropping dramatically thereafter (cnki.net). By comparison, a search for the keywords for "shark fin" and "public money," and "shark fin" and "corruption," on Factiva between 2012 and 2014 – the period when shark-fin consumption became a focus of formal policy-making and implementation in China – produced around 140 hits in total, while a Chinese-language search on the CNKI Database found more than 330 results for the same period. Searches on Sina Weibo further reveal that Chinese social media discussions of sharks were a hot-button issue during 2012-2014, but there has been limited discussion since then (weibo.com).

The CNKI figures point to the greater prominence of government action on shark-fin consumption in mainland China compared with actions by international conservation organizations. This finding is perhaps unsurprising – the PRC government not only exercises considerable content control over Chinese media, but also decides which social and environmental problems should be fixed (or not). However, the decline of the shark-fin trade to current low levels suggests that a better understanding of the PRC case may offer insights for future environmental communication.

The next section illustrates these points by detailing the two interventions that plausibly help explain declining demand in China: first, WildAid's media campaign, and, second, the PRC government-led austerity campaign.

Discussion and Conclusions

WildAid's environmental communication, which targeted China as the world's historically leading consumer market for shark fin, adopted a key principle of coherent framing – tell a story that "rouses emotions," while overlooking injunctions not to "repeat any counter arguments" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 79). In 2006, WildAid launched a series of celebrity-fronted public service advertisements (PSAs) in China promoting protection of endangered species. They aired without charge on cable networks and the China Central Television station (Jeffreys, 2016a). This communication capitalized on the then-unusual international attention centered on China before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

One of the earliest sets of China-focused shark PSAs featured three female Olympian divers who appeared in short, visually spectacular videos in English and Chinese (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 766). The PSAs communicated that: (1) sharks are a vital part of the ocean

ecosystem and should be protected; (2) millions are killed annually because serving shark-fin soup at banquets honors the guests and host, or gives them "face"; (3) sharks are being decimated; and (4) China and Chinese people will "lose face" when that happens, so "don't eat shark fin soup!" The PSAs concluded with the WildAid tagline: "When the buying stops, the killing can too." The narratives thus combined environmental communication with appeals to national pride, suggesting that China's international reputation is more important than the forms of sociability associated with eating imperial cuisine. But the PSAs also demonstrate incoherent framing by potentially triggering the notion that eating shark-fin soup is a custom that "gives face" to individuals in more localized contexts.

Banquet behavior similarly framed Yao Ming's first PSA as a solo spokesperson on shark conservation. The PSA distributed before the 2010 Chinese New Year takes place in an upmarket restaurant with a wall-to-wall aquarium. It states, "What if you could see how shark-fin soup is made?" As a waiter carries bowls of soup to a table, the viewer sees blood pouring from the cut-off fins of a still-alive shark lying at the bottom of the aquarium (Shipin: Yao Ming, n.d.; Yao Ming – shark fin soup, 2009). A narrator says, "If you could see how each year up to 70 million sharks are killed to end up in soup, could you still eat it?" The camera shows ethnically Chinese diners looking at the shark. Yao Ming pushes away a bowl of soup. The narrator continues, "A third of all shark species are nearly extinct but we can help save them." As other diners begin to push away their bowls, Yao Ming concludes, "Remember, when the buying stops, the killing can too."

This PSA assumes that empathy with an edible animal supersedes host-guest relations and respect for tradition/custom. It ignores the possibility that refusing the soup might insult the host, and hence may damage continued family and/or work relationships. What makes the framing incoherent is that the invocation of tradition/custom creates an inconsistency between the tagline and the spectacle. The tagline equates "*buying*" to "killing" but the spectacle goes much further, more contentiously equating "*accepting hospitality*" to "killing".

A second Yao Ming PSA, released in 2011, opens with him looking over a sunny San Francisco Bay and asking: "What is the price of shark fin soup? If we keep killing tens of millions of sharks each year just for soup, it will change life in our oceans forever" (Yao Ming – the price of shark fin soup, 2011). The camera then reveals an apocalyptic image of a dry landlocked basin that has replaced the saltwater bay. Yao continues: "Is this the world we want to leave our children?… Let's keep sharks in our oceans, not in our soup." He concludes

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with the WildAid tagline, reminding viewers that ethical consumption can save the planet for future generations. The attention-getting spectacularism of this PSA potentially undermines the coherence of its environmental communication as there is no evident connection between eating shark fin and "dried-up" oceans.

WildAid's preference for spectacular messaging may explain the larger media take-up of its shark communication with international vis-à-vis domestic Chinese audiences. Journalists credit the Yao Ming PSAs as contributing to bans on shark fin in 2011 in the state of California and the Canadian city of Toronto – areas with large proportions of ethnically Chinese residents (Harmon, 2011; Rogers, 2013). Hailed as a victory against a "savage, barbaric practice" by conservation groups and pro-shark politicians, both bans faced court challenges for singling out a Chinese custom, rather than banning shark products in general (Rider, 2013; Rogers, 2013). Although the Toronto ban was overturned, the California ban was upheld. In 2019, Canada banned the import and export of shark fins that are not attached to a shark (Animal Welfare Institute, 2020).

WildAid also engaged inextensive shark-protection collaborations with Chinese national-level corporate and entertainment celebrities, as illustrated by the release of a 2012 Chinese-language PSA featuring five influential CEOs (Shipin: Yesheng jiuyuan, 2012). The PSA engages coherent framing by linking environmental protection with issues of global risk and national pride, while arguably using the "wrong messengers" (Lakoff, 2010, p. 80). Business leaders are aspirational role models in China, but "distrust" of the newly rich is common (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 768).

The PSA opens with the five CEOs sitting around a dining table, and asks: "When these business leaders come together, what do they talk about?" The CEOs say in turn: "We must plan for the future. We must protect our assets. We must think globally and act locally. We must make the world proud of China. We must protect our oceans by not eating shark fin." The PSA concludes with the WildAid tagline, implying that Chinese people who seek to be affluent, patriotic, cosmopolitan, and acclaimed, are forward-thinking and not tradition-bound; they can save the world's oceans by choosing not to eat a dish once prepared for emperors.

The CEOs are members of the China Entrepreneur Club (CEC), an elite not-for-profit whose links with WildAid highlight the emergence in China of elite-led translocal networks of action focused on the environment. In 2008, the CEC and China's Ocean University released a "shark fin nutrition report" revealing that shark fin has no nutritional value and

contains toxins (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 769). In 2009, Zhang Xingsheng, a CEC member and director of the North Asia region of the Nature Conservancy, started a conversation on China's Twitter-like Weibo, calling on the PRC's legislature to ban shark-fin consumption. Zhang (2011) has over 1.6 million Weibo followers, but the shark conversation attracted fewer than 330 responses.

In 2009, the CEC celebrated Earth Day by launching a "Protect Sharks: Don't Eat Shark Fin" initiative with WildAid and domestic environmental groups (Shu baiming qiyejia xiangying, 2009). CEC members pledged to neither eat shark fin nor accept or give gifts of shark fin. Calls for pledges were posted on a dedicated website titled "Stop: No Shark-fin Buying, No Sharks Killing" (2009), receiving over 2,400 responses. Celebrity CEOs such as Wang Shi (2009) reposted messages about the pledge on their blogs – over 31 million people read Wang's blog, although his shark thread attracted fewer than 150 posts.

The CEC and other organizations also ran multiple shark-protection activities in 2011-2013, using the slogans: "Don't Eat Shark Fin [for 2012 New Year's Banquets]" and "Create Zero-Shark-Fin Cities: Don't Eat in Shark-Fin Restaurants" (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 769-770). Tencent, China's largest internet service portal, created a "Don't Eat Shark Fin" website, which listed affiliates, provided news updates, and featured the WildAid tagline (Juchi yuchi, n.d.). But only 1,600 people had clicked the 'I promise not to eat shark fin' pledge as of 2015 (and the link is no longer active). Around 100 organizations signed an unsuccessful petition urging the Shenzhen government to make Shenzhen China's first "Shark-Fin Free City."

Although these initiatives involved action at an unambiguously influential level, they failed to get visible support, as the organizers admitted in media interviews (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 770). Support chiefly came from multinational hotel chains and domestic restaurant chains with international aspirations, which had already committed to supporting WildAid. The "Zero Shark Fin" organizers subsequently launched initiatives to attract volunteers in various cities, working on the assumption that 1,000 volunteers in each city would translate into broader action through social media networks. These efforts also met with limited success.

The failure of these efforts to attract visible public support suggests that the "wrong messengers" fronted the environmental communication (Lakoff, 2010, p. 80). This conclusion is partly confirmed by responses to a WildAid youth-focused campaign called "I'm Finished with Fins," which was launched in 2013 with support from the celebrity hosts

of *Happy Camp*, a hugely popular Chinese family variety show. The associated PSA on Youku, a Chinese version of YouTube, attracted more than 83,000 views and multiple posts on other social media totaling more than 360,000 views (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 771; Shipin: Kuailejiazu wo yu yuchi, n.d.). Many posts reiterated WildAid's communication that "shark finning is brutal." However, others accused the celebrity hosts of being sanctimonious because "only rich people can eat such things." Yet others suggested that environmental communication should be posted in government departments – because government officials were known to be major consumers of luxury seafood items – rather than on sites used by "ordinary citizens" (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 771).

However, WildAid's leveraging of elite networks succeeded where it might have been most expected to fail: it brought the issue of shark-fin consumption to the March 2012 meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC) – China's so-called "rubber stamp" legislature. The full congress of nearly 3,000 party-selected but publicly "elected" members meets for around two weeks every year to vote through bills, the main content of which is determined by party committees and government departments. While members, including major CEOs and entertainment celebrities, are expected to submit motions on alternative public policies, and increasingly do so, such motions are rarely adopted (Jeffreys, 2016b).

Ding Liguo, a CEC member, steel magnate, and NPC representative, submitted a motion drafted by Zhang Xingsheng from the Nature Conservancy recommending that government departments set an international example of good practice by banning shark-fin soup at state-sponsored banquets (Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 771). A publicized reply in mid-2012 from the State Council, the PRC's highest organ of state administration, stated that legislation would result by 2015. In late 2013, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the Regulations on Domestic Official Hospitality for Party and Government Organs. Article 9 states that official dinners should not involve high-end cuisine or dishes that contain shark fin, bird's nest, or any protected animal. The sale of shark fin promptly further declined in mainland China.

But the primary government motivation for banning shark-fin soup at official banquets was political survival rather than environmentalism (Jeffreys, 2016a). Between late 2012 and early 2013, incoming President Xi Jinping announced measures to combat government corruption and extravagant spending on official receptions, stating that the persistence of such problems would lead to the downfall of the party and government (Xi,

2014, pp. 17-18 & 399). The State Council presumably acted on Ding Liguo's proposal because the central government had already committed to the now-popular austerity measures.

While inadvertently highlighting the potential of authoritarian environmentalism, the greater media visibility of the government austerity measures relative to shark-protection initiatives may be explained by the different sources of demand for shark-fin dishes – government officials versus private individuals. WildAid's celebrity- and elite-endorsed conservation communication was framed in terms of changing individual discretionary behavior, especially that of young, well-off Chinese. Shark-protection campaigns clearly have the capacity to alter individual consumption patterns, as evidenced by the success of the Yao Ming environmental communication in North America. The authority of celebrity endorsements may also be persuading young Chinese adults that eating shark fin is bad for the environment.

But the PSAs' evocation of banqueting and associated social relations arguably involved incoherent framing in the Chinese context as it misrepresented the choices available, culturally, to recipients of hospitality. Shark-fin consumption in China is rarely framed at an individual level; the main purchasers are also older than the target audience of celebrity-endorsed conservation communication. They are parents of young adults who are getting married with expensive celebratory banquets, or people with sufficient access to organizational resources to afford prestige-giving banquets. More generally, the framing may lack effectiveness because most young adults in China are unlikely to purchase an expensive item such as shark fin in the first place.

Instead, the government austerity measures directly affected the behavior of elites whose luxury consumption was driven by the need to build intra-party, intra-government, and business relationships to achieve personal success, and by the availability of public funds. These measures had an almost instant effect, based on media reports of high-end restaurants closing or changing their menus to accommodate the new constraints on officials' hospitality expenditures (Dent & Clarke, 2015, p. 38; Jeffreys, 2016a, p. 772). This success illustrates how an environmental communication campaign aiming to transform individual consumer choices can become a political "big issue" once an authoritarian government links it to government spending.

The austerity measures reinforced and extended the publicity associated with the earlier celebrity-endorsed shark conservation campaigns. The influence of such conservation

communication, which dovetailed with an emerging political agenda, spotlights the potential for environmental organizations and elite syndicates to effect social change in China. These latter organizations managed not only to persuade national and local elites to roll out shark-protection campaigns across numerous cities (despite the general failure of such activities), but also brought shark conservation to the attention of China's legislature. The scale of that enterprise shows how NGO and elite-led communicative activism can be self-reinforcing, leading one group of organizations and elites to inspire other groups to undertake similar activities, regardless of national boundaries. This suggests that celebrity-corporate activism could be an important force for future action on the environment in China, given the limited spaces available for broader political participation in that country.

Although the decline in China's shark-fin trade cannot solely be attributed to celebrity-endorsed conservation communication and government austerity measures, both contributed to a reduced demand for shark fin at elite, government-corporate banquets. This case study consequently highlights the complementarities between activism led by international conservation organizations and top-down government action in advancing environmental sustainability objectives. However, for international environmental activism to be more significantly successful in country-specific settings, the use of communication practice based on "Western" models clearly needs refining. It not only matters how we frame the environment and sharks, but also how we understand the environment of human action in different cultural contexts.

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