Translocal Celebrity Activism: Shark-Protection Campaigns in Mainland China

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Shanghai-born Yao Ming, a retired star player with the American National Basketball Association, is the celebrity face of translocal conservation campaigns to stop the consumption of shark-fin soup in Chinese restaurants worldwide. The standard justification for such communication practices is that they will generate media publicity and save shark populations, by encouraging increasingly affluent Chinese consumers to stop eating a luxury food item based on cruel and unsustainable practices. To date, there has been limited research on the nature of shark-protection campaigns in mainland China, the proclaimed major future market for shark fin. This paper fills that gap. It contends that these campaigns have missed their target, being heavily influenced by communication strategies used in international campaigns and providing incoherent local framing. Declining demand for shark fin demonstrates instead that government austerity measures have had a greater impact on luxury consumption practices, inadvertently highlighting the potential of "authoritarian environmentalism".

Key words*: Celebrity; China; framing; media; shark consumption; authoritarian environmentalism*

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Shark-fin soup is a luxury food item consumed in contemporary societies largely by ethnically Chinese people at banquets marking momentous occasions, such as Chinese New Year and weddings, and government and corporate events. Shark fin became an established ingredient in Chinese *haute cuisine* during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Traditionally, shark-fin soup was served as a tribute to the emperor, the proclaimed ruler of all under heaven. It honoured 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 would be conferred on those who ate its fins (Clarke, Milner-Gulland, & Cemare, 2007, p. 307; Fabinyi, 2011, p. 88). Today, serving shark-fin soup honours the host and their guests, both by confirming the wealth or status of the host and intimating that the guests are respected by the persons or organizations paying for the banquet. Eating shark-fin soup is a social event.

International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with marine conservation, for example, WildAid, contend that shark-fin consumption is based on cruel and unsustainable fishing practices. The San Francisco-based NGO claims that "fins from up to 73 million sharks" are used every year for shark-fin soup (Sharks, n.d.). Some of these sharks are finned alive and then thrown back into the ocean to drown or bleed to death, because the fins have more commercial value than the rest of the shark. China's growing prosperity means that an increasing number of people can now afford to serve a "once rare and expensive delicacy" (Sharks, n.d.). This increasing consumption threatens to make one-third of open-ocean shark populations extinct, destroying a 400-million-year-long balance of ocean marine life. Yet shark fin reportedly has little flavour or nutritional and medicinal value, and eating shark fin may be unhealthy as shark fins contain high concentrations of mercury and other toxins (Sharks, n.d.). Using the now standard marketing practices of international NGOs (Brockington, 2009; Hassid & Jeffreys, 2015), WildAid has enlisted celebrity ambassadors – including basketball player Yao Ming – to generate spectacular media publicity for its Shark Conservation Program.

WildAid's shark conservation program is a translocal activist strategy aiming to connect and influence people in different locations at the same time through the exchange of celebrity-

endorsed information, ideas and identities. The program's core conservation message – "when the buying stops, the killing can too" – is directed at multiple locations and audiences around the world through multilingual broadcast, print and social media. The celebrities that deliver this message have international, national and local appeal. The rollout of specific campaigns mobilizes diverse networks of actors to transform both individual behaviours and government practice, by attempting to stop shark-fin consumption and obtain support for anti-shark finning legislation. The program also elicits different forms of sociability and community activity. Some of these are intended, such as expressions of cosmopolitan environmental awareness displayed through refusal to eat shark-fin dishes, participation in public education activities, and activism for legislative change. Others are neither intended nor desirable, such as vituperative 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" (Watson, 2005; see also comments on Chan, 2013; Reynolds, 2013).

As a translocal activist strategy, WildAid's shark conservation program demonstrates George Lakoff's claim that successful communication about new conceptions of and action on the environment requires "coherent framing". Lakoff (2010) argues that human beings do not perceive the meaning of "facts" directly; we think via typically unconscious (but socially variable) interpretive contexts which he calls "frames". It is *not* the case that: "if you just tell people the facts, they will reason to the right conclusion" (Lakoff, 2010, pp. 72–3). Facts "will be ignored", unless they make sense in terms of culturally-embedded systems of frames, which include sociological roles, locales, etiquette, general modes of understanding, values, emotional patterns, and so on (Lakoff, 2010, pp. 72–3, 71 & 77). To be communicated successfully, "the facts" must be framed persuasively and coherently, without activating opposing frames, and associated counter-arguments and conventional habits (Lakoff, 2010, pp. 72 & 79). Persuasive framing could entail: using an exemplary messenger; appropriate visuals; narratives that link the frames and the message; framing issues in morally acceptable terms; and *never* repeating the opposing arguments (Lakoff, 2010, pp. 79–80).

This paper explores the relevance of Lakoff's conception of "coherent framing" for translocal environmental communication by examining the rollout and reception of shark-protection campaigns in mainland China. It first details the celebrity-endorsed campaign promoted in mainland China by the international NGO WildAid. It then examines the shark-protection

efforts of business elites associated with the China Entrepreneur's Club. Finally, it explores why these activist efforts are superseded in significance by government austerity measures. The paper thus offers an empirically informed study of contemporary mediatized environmental communication (and conflict) as a product of the mutually constitutive, but often unpredictable, interactions between NGO-activism, media, industry and formal politics, which traverse the local, national and transnational to varying degrees (see Hutchins & Lester, 2015).

The paper also raises the issue of "authoritarian environmentalism". The People's Republic of China (PRC) is a focus of debates on the relative merits of "democratic versus authoritarian environmentalism" because of its growing number of environmental organizations and comparatively rapid advances in legislation on environmental protection (Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Gilley, 2012). China's system of one-party rule has enabled the Party-state to ignore many pressing environmental issues and ensured that Chinese environmental organizations typically complement state goals of tackling (in politically non-confronting ways) the environmental degradation that has accompanied rapid economic growth (Ho & Edmonds, 2012; Shapiro, 2012). However, the Party-state also has the perceived capacity to implement significant environmental protection policies quickly because, unlike in western democracies, it does not have to cater to the interests of high-consuming citizens as voters, and can arguably override the interests of business groups that might be opposed to environmental action (Gilley, 2012, p. 288). This capacity is inadvertently highlighted by changing patterns of shark fin consumption associated with the recent introduction of government austerity measures in the PRC.

I conclude that translocal celebrity environmental activism in mainland China has missed its target, being heavily influenced by communication strategies used in international campaigns and providing incoherent local framing. In particular, efforts to reduce shark-fin consumption through changing *individual* discretionary behaviour overlook the considerable consumption associated with official largesse. Declining demand for shark fin associated with government austerity measures demonstrates claims that broader efforts to reduce corruption may have greater potential to influence patterns of luxury food consumption in China than environmental communication campaigns (Fabinyi, 2011, p. 89).

China's celebrities and shark protection

Environmental communication mediated through celebrities and corporate elites is an established, albeit controversial, practice in western societies (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009). Supporters argue that leveraging "fame" helps to raise public awareness of environmental issues and organizations by generating media publicity, demystifying campaign issues, and attracting new audiences and sponsorship (United Nations Environmental Programme, n.d.). Critics contend that mediatized celebrity-corporate activism refers to an elitist mode of social control that depoliticizes environmental issues by presenting non-experts delivering simplified messages as authoritative voices for complex issues, turning environmentalism into a fashion or fad, and sometimes encouraging the ongoing exploitation of the natural world through the consumption of cause-related products (Brockington, 2009; Goodman, 2013).

These arguments have reduced explanatory capacity in the PRC– an emerging authoritarian superpower with a history of (failed) socialist experimentation, and recent rapid economic growth and social change. China's private entrepreneurs and celebrities do not comprise an established "power elite" as in western societies, that is, a networked group of non-elected, "non-state" actors who influence national and increasingly international government decision-making. Members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in positions of institutional authority comprised the only identifiable elite group in mainland China until the mid-1990s. After the PRC's founding in 1949, revolutionary politics ensured that imperial- and Republican-era elite groups – rural gentry, urban capitalists and opposition political, military, religious and cultural figures – ceased to exist as significant agents of governance, drivers of economic enterprise, and formers of local opinion and values (Hassid & Jeffreys, 2015, p. 81). Throughout the Mao era (1949–1976), curtailment of the monetary economy, nationalization of industry and agrarian land redistribution, prevented private enterprise and significant private wealth accumulation. Party control of the state-owned media also ensured that China's media chiefly communicated Party-state ideology and policies, and promoted revolutionary heroes and political figures as role models. A stratum of newly rich private entrepreneurs and entertainment celebrities has emerged along with the PRC's post-1978 policy of partially privatizing the economy and "opening up to the rest of the world", which gained momentum in the 1990s, and development of a semi-commercialized media (Hassid & Jeffreys, 2015, p. 82). While China's financial and cultural elites have limited political

power, they sometimes influence public policy debates (Jeffreys, 2016), as illustrated by shark-protection campaigns.

The most prominent celebrity spokesperson for shark conservation in both the USA and mainland China is Yao Ming, the Shanghai-born owner of the Chinese Basketball Association's Shanghai Sharks, and a retired star player with the American National Basketball Association (NBA). Yao appeals to multiple constituencies as a translocal celebrity. Ranked by *Forbes Magazine* as mainland China's richest celebrity for six consecutive years between 2004 and 2009 (Yu, 2009), the *Washington Times* once claimed that: "The Yao craze knows no limits to time, geography or media" (Oates & Polumbaum, 2004, p. 208).

Yao Ming is the celebrity face of a series of spectacular Public Service Advertisements (PSAs) produced by WildAid that aim to encourage individuals to become ethical consumers and save the world's oceans by refusing to eat shark-fin soup. Yao features in short, visually stunning videos that conclude with the message: "When the buying stops, the killing can too". The PSAs' narratives adopt some key principles of coherent framing – tell a story that "rouses emotions" and don't repeat any counter arguments (Lakoff, 2010, p. 79). They imply that shark fin is the main reason for fishing sharks (which may not be the case), and that finning is the normal way of fishing sharks. They also use the highest figure provided by fisheries scientist Shelley Clarke (n.d.), who estimates that between 26–73 million sharks are killed each year, while ignoring her comment that: "no one knows how many sharks are killed for their fins, how many have their carcasses dumped at sea, or how many sharks are alive when finned".

Yao Ming's activism dates back to August 2006 when WildAid launched a series of PSAs in China promoting protection of endangered species, before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (China's elites and WildAid, 2006). In 2006, Yao Ming signed a WildAid pledge not to eat shark fin, and declared to a press conference in 2007 that shark-fin soup would not be served at his wedding banquet (Timeline for shark protection efforts, 2011). Yao Ming, Li Ning (gymnast and sportswear tycoon) and Liu Huan (musician) also featured in conservation messages that were shown on the state-run China Central Television Station and cable networks such as National Geographic (Yao Ming, Li Ning, Liu Huan, deng, 2006). These messages were further disseminated through state-owned advertising outlets, such as: taxi and

inflight video monitors; video billboards at airports and shopping centres; and printed advertisements on subway station walls and bus stops (WildAid 2010 Annual Report, 2011, p. 12). In fact, WildAid (n.d.) claims to have leveraged around USD 100 million per year in pro-bono media placement via state and private media partnerships in China to provide environmental communication.

Three female Olympic divers – Guo Jingjing, Li Ting and Zhou Jihong – were among the first group of mainland Chinese sporting celebrities to feature in WildAid shark conservation PSAs. The divers appeared in separate PSAs produced in English and Chinese, delivering the collective message that: (a) sharks play an essential role in the ocean ecosystem and we have to protect them; (b) millions of sharks are killed each year because offering shark-fin soup at Chinese banquets honours the host and guests, or gives them "face"; (c) shark populations are being wiped out as a result; and (d) China and the Chinese people will "lose face" when that happens, so "don't eat shark fin soup!" (Guo Jingjing, 2010; Li Ting: Blink, 2010; Zhou Jihong: Duty, 2010). The PSAs conclude with the WildAid tagline: "When the buying stops, the killing can too". They therefore combine activist messaging with appeals to national pride, suggesting through reference to Olympian sports stars that China's international reputation is more important than the forms of sociability associated with the eating of imperial cuisine. The PSAs arguably also offer an example of incoherent framing by triggering the notion that eating shark-fin soup is an important Chinese custom that "gives face" to individual hosts and guests in more localized contexts.

Similar incoherence is present in the first WildAid PSA featuring Yao Ming as a solo spokesperson. It is framed by banquet behaviour, being distributed just before the 2010 Chinese New Year and set in an upscale restaurant with a wall-to-wall aquarium. The Lunar New Year is China's most important holiday and is typically celebrated by hosting large banquets for family and friends. The PSA begins with the statement: "What if you could see how shark-fin soup is made?" It opens with interior images of the restaurant. As a waiter carries covered bowls of soup to put on a table, the viewer sees blood gushing 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). That graphic footage is allegedly real footage of "a live tawny nurse shark dumped on an Indonesian reef with its fins removed to supply the soup trade" (Yao Ming saves the sharks!!, 2009). An anonymous 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 pans to shots of ethnically Chinese diners looking at the bleeding shark. Yao Ming pushes away the bowl of soup in front of him. The anonymous narrator states: "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 by speaking the WildAid tagline: "Remember when the buying stops, the killing can too" (Yao Ming – shark fin soup, 2009).

This spectacular PSA offers an example of incoherent framing in mainland Chinese settings. It activates "conventional habits" by framing the event as social banquet, but assumes that empathy with an edible animal naturally supersedes the social relations between host and guest. It ignores the possibility that pushing away the soup might imply an insult to the host, and hence may not only be a difficult action to perform, but also may have negative consequences in terms of continued family and/or work relationships. This incoherence is compounded by the inconsistency of the tagline (which equates "*buying*" to "killing") with the spectacle (which more contentiously equates "*accepting hospitality*" to "killing").

The second WildAid PSA featuring Yao Ming as a solo spokesperson was released in late September 2011, following a publicized corporate banquet in Shanghai hosted by Yao Ming and British tycoon, Richard Branson (Save our sharks in Shanghai, 2011). The PSA, titled "The Price of Shark Fin Soup", opens with an image of Yao Ming looking over the San Francisco Bay, admiring the blue water and sky. Yao Ming states: "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". The camera then pans to an apocalyptic shot of a dry landlocked basin that has replaced the saltwater bay. Yao continues: "Is this the world we want to leave our children? Together we can save the oceans. Let's keep sharks in our oceans, not in our soup". The camera pans to a shot of Yao Ming and a group of children in front of a sunny San Francisco Bay. He concludes by speaking the WildAid tagline, reminding viewers that ethical consumerism can save the world for future generations (Yao Ming – the price of shark fin soup, 2011). Again, the attention-getting spectacularism of this PSA potentially undermines the coherence of its environmental message, as there is no evident connection between eating shark fin and "dried-up" oceans.

The preference for the spectacular over other possible, more appropriate visuals and localized framing, perhaps explains why WildAid's shark conservation program has been more successful with international and Anglophone audiences than it has in China. WildAid claims

that the Yao Ming Shark-fin Soup PSA obtained significant media coverage for the organization and its causes, reaching an audience of over 1 billion viewers across China and generating over 100 media stories throughout the world (WildAid 2010 Annual Report, 2011, pp. 10–12). However, a search for the Chinese-language keywords "Yao Ming" (姚明) and "shark fin" (鱼翅) on the China Core Newspaper Full-text Database of the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI), a database of around 700 Chinese newspapers since 2000, obtained only 33 results for the nine years between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2014 (cnki.net, 5 March 2015). Not a great record of interest. English-language reporters initially proclaimed that "the media snub in China" was predictable; Yao's attack on Chinese culture being considered a "step too far" in a country "where outside interference is strictly resisted by the communist government" (Even Yao Ming is sidelined, 2006).

The media response to WildAid's shark-protection program was much better overseas. Journalists cite Yao Ming's involvement with WildAid as contributing to the introduction, in 2011, of controversial bans on the sale, consumption and possession, of shark fins in the USA state of California, and the Canadian city of Toronto – areas with a high proportion of ethnically Chinese residents (Lin, 2011; Rogers, 2013). Hailed as a victory against a "savage, barbaric practice" by pro-shark protection local politicians and conservation groups (Rider, 2013), both bans faced court challenges as intrusive and discriminatory, for singling out a Chinese custom, rather than banning all shark products, and potentially giving authorities the power to enter homes on suspicion the soup was being served (Rider, 2013; Rogers, 2013). Although the Toronto ban was overturned, the Californian ban came into effect on 1 July 2013 (Rogers, 2013). The European Union also agreed to ban shark finning on all vessels in EU waters and all EU registered vessels around the world on 6 June 2013 (Sullivan, 2013).

Contradicting earlier reservations about Chinese political censorship, a 2013 story in *The Guardian* claims instead that Yao Ming, as an "NBA giant", has ruined "small Chinese fish factories" by persuading Chinese youth to reject shark-fin dishes (Thibault, 2013). The article cites the owners of two shark processing factories as saying: "Society is turning against us … because of all these articles in the press", "business is no longer good" because young people won't eat shark-fin dishes (Thibault, 2013). One owner laments: "Our industry is pretty small and Yao Ming is highly respected, so the government doesn't support us" (Thibault, 2013).

These media-solicited claims imply the existence of defensive industry spokespersons attempting to counter the negative effects on industry of a successful activist campaign.

However, it is questionable whether Yao Ming's advocacy has led to a major decrease in sales of shark fin in mainland China, given the limited nature of broadcast media reportage it attracted. The dissemination of WildAid's campaign through social media may be helping to dissuade young adults in China from eating shark-fin dishes, but this assertion is hard to verify. As detailed below, it is more probable that any decline in sales of shark fin is attributable to either the efforts of Chinese business elites advocating for anti-shark fin legislation in 2012, or the PRC Government's introduction of austerity measures in December 2012.

China's entrepreneurs and shark protection

Apart from leveraging Yao Ming's fame, WildAid has mobilized an impressive array of business networks to garner support for its China-based shark conservation program. This has involved leveraging state and private media partnerships to obtain pro-bono media placement for environmental communication (WildAid n.d.), and obtaining support from other international NGOs, Chinese non-profits and prominent business figures. While opening the space for regulations that have dramatically curtailed the demand for shark fin in China, these efforts also attracted limited popular support.

In July 2012, WildAid premiered a Chinese-language shark-protection PSA featuring some of the PRC's most influential business leaders (Shipin: Yesheng jiuyuan, 2012). The 36-second-long video stars five CEOs: Li Dongsheng (TCL Corporation); Huang Nubo (Beijing Zhongkun Investment Group); Feng Lun (Beijing Vantone Real Estate); Hu Baosen (Jianye Real Estate); and Wei Xue (China Public Relations and Consultants). Li Dongsheng is the CEO of a state-owned multinational; the other four people are founders of private companies. All of these people are involved with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, including environmental protection (corporate philanthropy has been more or less mandated by central government policies since the mid-2000s) (Zu, 2009). Huang Nubo is Chair of the WildAid China Board and a Councillor for The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a US-based international NGO dedicated to land and marine conservation. Feng Lun is founder of the China Urban Realty Association (CURA), an affiliation of local real estate companies

established in 1999 with a CSR focus on the environment (Consultants, 2007). Feng Lun and Hu Baosen are members of the Alxa SEE Ecological Association (SEE), a CSR organization founded by nearly 100 entrepreneurs in 2004 (Charter members of SEE, 2004). Wei Xue is the wife of Li Dongsheng and Chair of the TCL Charity Foundation, which was established in 2012 to support the government welfare goals of poverty alleviation and disaster relief (Wei Xue, n.d.).

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 the PRC, but "resentment" and "distrust" of the newly rich is common (Fabinyi, 2011, p. 88). 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?" "We must plan for the future", says Li Dongsheng; "We must protect our assets", says Hu Baosen; "We must think globally and act locally", says Huang Nubo; "We must make the world proud of China", says Wei Xue. "We must protect our oceans by not eating shark fin", says Feng Lun (Shipin: Yesheng jiuyuan, 2012). The PSA concludes with the WildAid tagline, implying that those Chinese people who seek to be financially successful, 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 four men in the PSA are also members of the China Entrepreneur Club (CEC), which has advocated for shark conservation in China alongside WildAid and TNC since the late 2000s. These connections highlight the recent emergence in China of translocal networks of elites aiming to mobilize human, institutional, material, and discursive resources into networks of action focused on the environment. Established in 2006, the CEC is a non-profit organization and elite social club that aims to provide a platform for "Chinese entrepreneurial exchange" and "international collaboration", and to promote "sustainable economic and social development" (About us, 2007). In 2008, the CEC and China's Ocean University released a "shark fin nutrition report" stating that shark fin contains high levels of lead and mercury and has no nutritional or medicinal value ("Baohu shayu juchi yuchi", 2009). In January 2009, Zhang Xingsheng, a CEC member and Director of the North Asia region of TNC, started a conversation on China's Twitter-like Weibo, calling on the PRC's legislature to ban shark fin consumption. Zhang has over 1.6 million Weibo followers, but the shark conversation attracted less than 330 responses (Zhang, 2011).

On 22 April 2009, the CEC celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day by launching a "Protect Sharks: Don't Eat Shark Fin" initiative, in conjunction with WildAid, CURA and SEE (Shu baiming qiyejia xiangying, 2009). CEC members signed a pledge stating: "I won't eat shark fin and I won't invite others to eat shark fin; I won't accept gifts of shark fin and I won't give shark fin as a gift to others". Calls to log in a pledge 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) posted "Don't Eat Shark Fin" messages on their blogs – over 31 million people read Wang's blog, although his shark thread attracted less than 150 posts.

Also with the support of the CEC, a range of shark-protection activities were rolled out in different cities across the PRC between late 2011 and early 2013, with the slogan: "Create Zero-Shark-Fin Cities: Don't Eat in Shark-Fin Restaurants". On 22 December 2011, Tencent (China's largest Internet service portal), together with the Green Beagle Environment Institute, a Beijing-based NGO (www.bjep.org.cn/), launched a "No Shark-Fin Soup for 2012 New Year's Banquets" initiative. Green Beagle is headed by Wang Xue, who heads another NGO called Zero Shark Fin (www.zero.ngo.cn). Press releases indicate that the launch was supported by over 100 organizations, including the CEC and TNC (Bai jia jigou zai Beijing, 2011). Hotels and restaurants that committed to the "Zero Shark Fin" policy were rewarded with a commemorative plaque to hang in their premises stating that they are 'shark-fin free' (Beijing Jindingxuan guapai "ling yuchi", 2012). Tencent created a dedicated website to support the initiative titled "Don't Eat Shark Fin", which lists affiliated organizations and relevant news, and features the WildAid tagline, but appears to have attracted limited traffic to date (Juchi yuchi, n.d.). Only 1,600 people had clicked the 'I promise not to eat shark fin' pledge as of March 2015 (and the link is no longer active).

The "No Shark-Fin Soup for 2012 New Year's Banquets" initiative was supported by some local elites. Shangguan Junle, the owner of a Shanxi Province restaurant chain, declared in late 2011 that he would neither eat shark fin nor provide shark-fin dishes in his restaurants once his existing stocks were depleted, even though shark fin accounted for a third of his company's annual turnover (Restaurant serves dish of controversy, 2012). Shangguan received a "Shark-Fin Free" plaque for his efforts and is listed as a supporter on the Zero Shark Fin website (Chengnuo jujue yuchi de qiyejia, 2013). Shangguan also attracted

controversy by announcing that patrons at his restaurants on the first day of the Chinese New Year holidays, 3 January 2012, would receive free shark-fin dishes until his stocks were gone. Some netizens described Shangguan as an admirable role model, while others accused him of engaging in a promotional stunt (Shangguan Junle jiesuo "gaodiao cishan", 2012). Whichever the case may be, Shangguan posted a message on 9 January 2012 on Tencent's QQ, an online instant messaging service, calling on people to stop eating shark fin to protect the environment and their health, which was read by around 11,000 people (Shangguan, 2012).

Other local elites committed resources to the rollout of "Zero Shark Fin" initiatives in different cities across China in 2012. Green Beagle, Tencent, the CEC, and SEE, organized a petition, which was signed by more than 100 organizations, urging the Shenzhen Municipal Government to ban the sale of shark fin, and make Shenzhen China's first "Shark-Fin Free City" (Yang, 2012). The petition stated that a ban would send an important message about China's commitment to environmental protection, given Shenzhen's proximity to Hong Kong – the major market for shark fin. In Changsha, the Head of the Hunan Food Industry told journalists that a ban was not relevant because the city had a limited market for shark fin. However, some restaurateurs had indicated that they would follow Yao Ming and the CEC's lead (Yao & Shu, 2012). In Zhanjiang, posts were placed on blogs, by individuals describing themselves as junior high-school students, calling for volunteers to hand out shark-protection leaflets in shopping malls (Szyhippo, 2013).

Although these initiatives involved action at an unambiguously influential level, they failed to generate visible support. An interview with Wang Xue posted on Ynet.com in February 2013 suggested that city-based "Zero Shark Fin" initiatives were implemented because the "No Shark-Fin Soup for 2012 New Year's Banquets" initiative was unsuccessful. Tencent and Green Beagle were unable to attract large-scale support from major restaurants. A follow-up survey showed that "only 17 of 249 luxury hotels in Beijing, Shenzhen and Fuzhou" had stopped offering shark-fin dishes (Qin, 2013). Support chiefly came from multinational hotel chains, and domestic restaurant chains with international aspirations, that had already committed to supporting WildAid and a "No Shark Fin" policy, such as the Hong Kong-based Peninsular hotels chain and the South Beauty restaurant chain (80hou Wang Xue, 2013; see Figure 1 below). The "Zero Shark Fin" organizers subsequently launched initiatives in individual cities, attempting to attract popular support from volunteers, 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.

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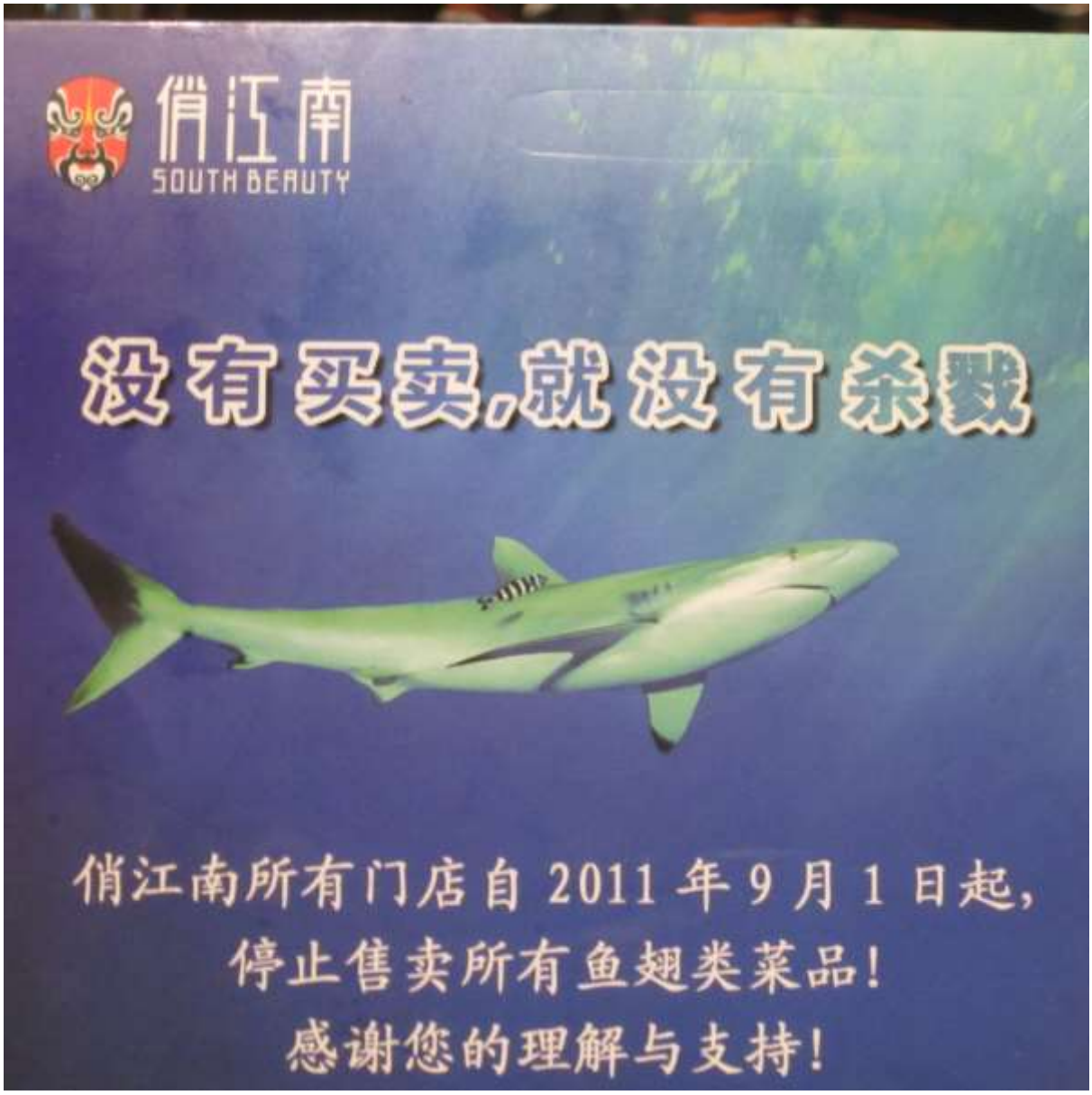

Figure 1: When the Buying Stops, the Killing Stops (Notice informing patrons of South Beauty that the restaurant chain will not provide shark fin dishes and products from 1 September 2011, and asking for their understanding and support)

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

of the five celebrity hosts of *Happy Camp*, a hugely popular family variety show. The associated PSA on Youku, a Chinese version of Youtube, has attracted more than 83,000 views and multiple posts on other social media totalling over 360,000 views (Cheng, 2013; Shipin: Kuailejiazu wo yu yuchi, n.d.). Many of these posts reiterate WildAid's celebrity-endorsed narratives that "shark finning is brutal" and "eating shark fin is unhealthy". However, others accuse the hosts of being "hypocritical" and "self-promoting" because "only rich people can eat such things". Yet others suggest that environmental communication should be located in government departments rather than targeting sites used by "ordinary citizens" (Spring-shine, 2013).

However, WildAid's leveraging of Chinese business figures succeeded where it might have been most expected to fail: it brought the issue of shark fin consumption to the attention of the 2012 meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's so-called "rubber stamp" legislature (Truex, 2014). 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 major content of which has already been decided by government departments and Party committee. While members are expected to submit motions on alternative policies and increasingly do so, such motions seldom become policy (Jeffreys, 2016).

In March 2012, Ding Liguo, a member of the CEC and SEE, submitted a motion to the NPC, which was drafted with the help of Zhang Xingsheng from TNC, recommending that relevant government departments set an international example of good practice by banning shark-fin soup at state-funded banquets (Yuan, 2012). Ding Liguo, ranked among the richest people in China in 2008, is the Chair of Delong Steel, a private company in Hebei Province (The 400 richest Chinese, 2008). He was a member for Hebei at the Eleventh NPC (2008–2012). An official reply from the administrative office of the State Council dated 16 June 2012 stated that legislation banning shark-fin dishes at state-funded banquets would result by 2015 (Yuan, 2012).

On 8 December 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 (Zhonggongzhongyangbangongting, 2013). Article 9 of the Regulations states that: "Official dinners should not involve: high-end cuisine or dishes that contain shark fin, bird's

nest, or any protected animal; cigarettes and premium drinks; the use of private clubs; and high consumption costs".

The sale of shark fin has since reportedly plummeted in China. A survey conducted by the PRC's Ministry of Commerce during Chinese New Year holidays in 2013 indicated that sales of shark fin were down by 70 per cent (Extravagant dining curbed by frugality call, 2013). A survey conducted by WildAid (n.d.) in late 2013 suggests that demand for shark fin had dropped on average by 82 per cent in Guangzhou – the major trade centre for shark fin in mainland China. Reports by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) indicate that the shark fin trade from Hong Kong to China dropped almost 90 per cent in that same year (Kao, 2014).

While WildAid (n.d.), the CEC and the WWF, 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), the available evidence suggests otherwise. As Lakoff (2010, p. 77) laments, environmental action tends to focus on individual behavioural change rather than political action, when "[to] an enormous degree, governmental action outweighs and shapes individual actions". In this instance, the dramatic decline in demand for shark fin is attributable to government action that has only tangential links to environmental communication and authoritarian environmentalism.

Government austerity and shark protection

The cause of shark conservation in mainland China was unexpectedly boosted in December 2012 when incoming President Xi Jinping introduced eight provisions designed to reduce governmental corruption and improve the work habits of government employees (Zhonggongzhongyangzhengzhiju zhaokai huiyi, 2012). The eighth provision, advocating austerity measures to curb extravagant spending, has led to a dramatic reduction in luxury goods consumption in China. According to the Ministry of Commerce, a survey assessing the effects of austerity measures over the Chinese New Year in 2013 showed that revenues in high-end restaurants in certain cities had fallen by between 20 and 35 per cent when compared to those for the preceding year (Extravagant dining curbed, 2013). Sales of shark fin were down by 70 per cent and sales of birds' nests and abalone were down by 40 per cent. Other media reports indicate that the austerity measures have reduced demand for imported goods such as Australian wine (Greenblat, 2014) and altered luxury consumption and

business practices across the country. For example, in March 2013, the Emperor Shark Fin Restaurant in Jinan City changed its name and cut the number of luxury items on its menu, while increasing its standard-priced dishes, to attract patronage and compensate for reduced custom from local government officials (Li, 2013). Taxi drivers in Dunhuang, a "silk road" tourism destination, told the author of this paper that the city's luxury hotel, restaurant and wine business had declined along with reduced custom from government officials attending "conferences". But "farmhouse accommodations" providing "local food and beer" were booming as government officials altered their expectations and spending patterns to conform to government policy (Personal conversations, September 2013).

These changes have been widely publicized in China's media. A search for the keywords "shark fin" (鱼翅) and "austerity" (勤俭节约) on CNKI obtained 74 hits for the two-year period between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2014 (cnki.net, 4 February 2015). This figure points to the publicity success of the government action when compared to NGO action, being more than double the number of mentions that "Yao Ming" and "shark fin" obtained in nine years.

While government spokespersons now claim that the austerity measures are helping to support sustainable consumption and protect the environment (Extravagant dining curbed, 2013), the motivation for introducing the Regulations on Domestic Official Hospitality was political survival rather than environmentalism. The Xi Jinping–Li Keqiang administration's austerity measures followed earlier, less focused support for reducing official extravagance under the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao administration (2002–2012). Hu Jintao stated at a Communist Party Congress in 2007 that preventing corruption was important because corruption diminished popular support for the Party and threatened its survival (Delegates acclaim CPC's determination in curbing corruption, 2007). Although the Hu–Wen administration focused on individual acts of large-scale graft and bribery, the spending of public funds on lavish dining and entertainment is a long-standing focus of public condemnation in China (Buneng jiemi de "gongkuan chihe 3000 yi", 2012). Indeed, it is probable that the State Council agreed to consider Ding Liguo's proposal to ban shark-fin dishes at state banquets because the central government had already committed to the austerity measures. These measures are, needless to say, disliked by civil servants and businesses but enjoy broad popular support.

Conclusion

While inadvertently highlighting the potential of authoritarian environmentalism, the success of government austerity measures relative to NGO-led shark-protection initiatives may be explained by the different sources of demand for shark-fin dishes in mainland China – government officials versus private individuals. NGO-led and celebrity-endorsed initiatives followed an international social-activism campaign and communication model of moral persuasion by role models. Their message was framed in terms of changing individual discretionary behaviour, especially that of young affluent Chinese whose tastes have moved towards conspicuous consumption. Shark-protection campaigns clearly have the capacity to alter individual consumption patterns, as evidenced by Yao Ming's success in North America with ethnically Chinese people. The authority of the celebrity endorsement may also be persuading young adults in China that eating shark-fin soup is bad for the environment. But the PSAs' evocation of banqueting and associated social relations arguably involves incoherent framing in the mainland Chinese context insofar as it misrepresents the choices available, culturally, to recipients of hospitality. Shark-fin consumption in China is rarely framed at an individual level; and, the main purchasers of shark-fin products are older than the target audience of celebrity-endorsed environmental campaigns, being the parents of young adults who are getting married and having expensive celebratory banquets, or people with sufficient access to organizational resources to afford prestige-giving banquets. More generally, the framing may lack effectiveness because the majority of young adults in mainland China have never seen an ocean, and are unlikely to purchase an expensive item such as shark fin in the first place.

In contrast, the austerity measures directly affect the behaviour of government elites whose luxury consumption is driven by the need to build intra-government, intra-Party and business relationships to achieve personal success, and by the availability of public funds. Unlike the WildAid efforts, these messages had an almost instant effect. The explicit (and credible) threat of being publicly exposed and punished for failing to constrain acts of conspicuous consumption has proved far more effective than NGO-led efforts in moral persuasion targeting affluent young adults. This success demonstrates that efforts to reduce corruption have greater capacity to influence patterns of luxury food consumption in China than environmental communication campaigns.

Despite their comparative failure, celebrity-endorsed shark conservation campaigns highlight the potential for environmental NGOs and elite syndicates to effect social change in China. These latter organizations managed to persuade national and local elites to rollout shark-protection campaigns across multiple cities. 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 and corporate activism could possibly be a significant force for social change in China, given the limited spaces available for broader political participation in that country. Such activism may ensure that financial and cultural elites do not resurrect the demand for shark fin by providing it at corporate-funded dinners to court "favours" from government officials. However, in order for international environmental activism to be more significantly successful, the use of spectacular 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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