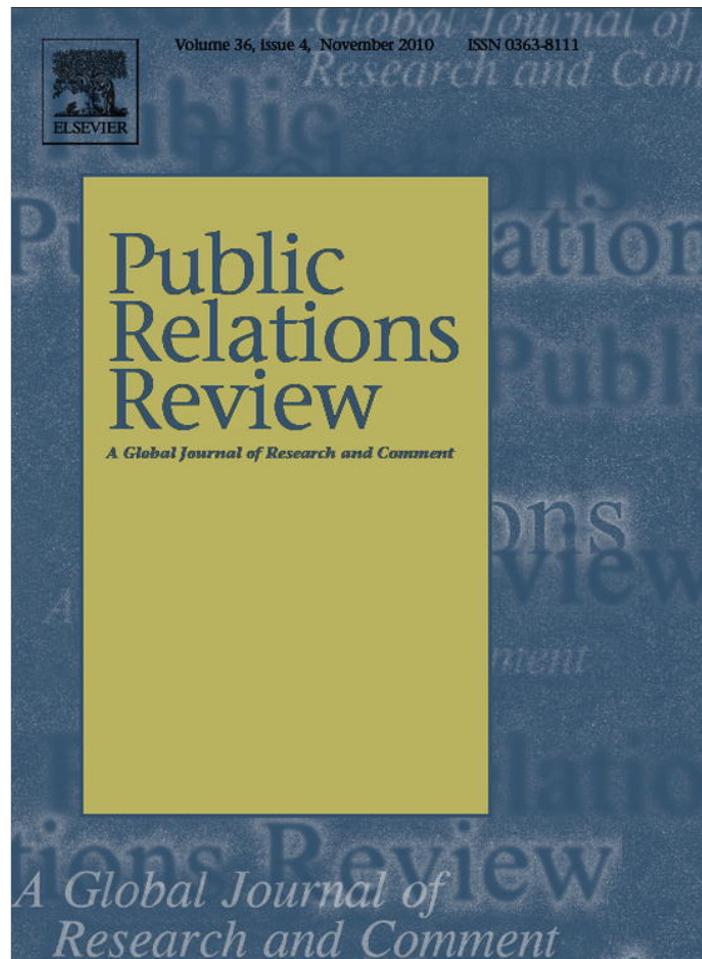


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Relationship-building by Chinese ENGOS' websites: Education, not activation

Aimei Yang, Maureen Taylor*

University of Oklahoma, 395 W. Linsey, Norman, OK 73019, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study extends previous public relations research that has evaluated how the websites of Northern NGOs facilitate relationship-building (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), affect the media agenda (Reber & Kim, 2006), and gather and disseminate information about civil society activities (Brophy & Halpin, 1999). The study explores the relationship-building functions of Chinese ENGOS. The content analysis suggests that Chinese ENGOS' websites reflect the realities of activism in China. They provide information to members, the public, and the media but these organizations do little to organize their publics to participate in environmental social movements. The findings provide a picture of the early years of the Chinese environmental movement and the use of the Internet in their public relations and advocacy.

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The diffusion of the Internet has spread into many countries and has gradually become a part of millions of people's everyday lives. This computer-mediated communication has demonstrated considerable impact on communities, network building patterns, and the online strategic communication of all types of organizations (Bach & Stark, 2004; Howard, 2002; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). It is not an exaggeration to claim that the Internet will play an important role in public relations.

The adoption rates of the Internet and website communication for organizations across all sectors of society continues to grow (Simmons, Armstrong, & Durkin, 2008; Zimmer, 2003). As for non-governmental and non-profit organizations (NGOs), especially Northern NGOs (NGOs with headquarters located in or originating from developed countries), studies have found many of them utilize the Internet in their daily operations (Warkentin, 2001). Research suggests that the Internet helps to reduce costs for organizing collective actions (Bimber, 1998), to facilitate NGOs' internal and external communication, and the Internet may be able to provide marginalized interest groups access to key publics (Mitra, 2005). Further, in terms of network building, the Internet could help NGOs to extend their existing networks (Xie, 2008), and to build relationships with other like-minded social actors (Taylor et al., 2001). The adoption and successful operation of organizational websites thus can further set up a stable platform for organizations to manage information flows and to constantly communicate with publics (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007).

With the diffusion of the Internet, Southern NGOs (NGOs with headquarters located in or originating from developing countries) are also increasingly adopting the Internet and websites (Yang, 2003). When compared with their Northern counterparts, the adoption and utilization of the Internet by Southern NGOs may imply even more exciting and important implications for developing economies and societies. We have this hope because the functioning of civil society, or what Heath (2006) has termed, a fully functioning society, relies on a "place" for community members to exchange ideas. In some developing countries where citizens' free expression has yet been guaranteed, a meaningful utilization of the Internet and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mtaylor@ou.edu (M. Taylor).

websites may offer alternative channels to advocate civil activities and mobilize voluntary participation. Further, Southern NGOs represent a localized and indigenous civil power. Their development can spread the value of civil society through connected networks.

There is an emergent literature about Chinese public relations via the Internet (Maynard & Tian, 2004; Pan & Xu, 2009). This research has explored corporate use of the web in Chinese public relations. The purpose of this research is to examine the ways in which the Internet has changed many aspects of civil participation in China (Wong & Chan, 2002), and has created public relations opportunities for Chinese NGOs (Xie, 2008; Yang, 2003). Although a number of studies have noted the value of the Internet in facilitating Chinese NGOs' development (Xie, 2008; Yang, 2003), few studies to date have explored how Chinese NGOs' websites are designed, and what potential functions these websites could play in building relationships with publics. Recognizing this gap, this study proposes to systematically examine the public relations features of Chinese NGOs' websites. In China, by 2008, the number of Internet-users had increased to 253 million, which is the world's largest Internet-users population (Jia, 2008). This population accounts for about one-sixth of the entire Chinese population. The study is relevant because it seeks to answer the question posed by Yang (2009): "Is it still possible to understand social change in China without understanding the popular struggles linked to the Internet?" (p. 1). Many scholars have documented the burgeoning rise of Chinese Internet culture, and have recognized its strong influence on political and social lives of Chinese citizens (Yang, 2003). We believe that the Internet will have an impact on the evolution of Chinese societal discourse.

This study extends previous public relations research that has evaluated the websites of Northern NGOs such as environmental activists. The paper begins with a literature review of the current development of Chinese NGOs, and the influence of the Internet on websites functions and design of Chinese NGOs in relationships building. The next section provides a discussion of the methodology that guided the content analysis of Chinese NGOs' websites. The final sections detail the results, discussion, and implications of these findings for the mediated public relations efforts of Southern NGOs.

1. The relationship-building needs of Chinese NGOs

1.1. Economic development drives social development

The struggle of modernization in China is "constantly accompanied by profound cultural predicaments, which some scholars have described as a comprehensive crisis ranging from cultural identity to values and ideology" (Luo, 2002, p. 7). Different, and sometimes, contradictory values combine to influence the Chinese society. The chaotic interplay of values is also accompanied by social problems such as the uneven distribution of social wealth, environmental deterioration, and problems caused by the large population (Schwartz, 2004). The government can hardly single-handedly solve conflicting demands and complicated problems. Further, the for-profit sector in China is still undergoing profound structural reformation with organizations falling across a wide spectrum of economic stability. In other words, Chinese for-profits in general lack the ability and institutionalized social responsibility norms to sufficiently contribute to the production of public goods (Ho, 2001). Hence, there continue to be social gaps and marginalized needs after a decade of rapid transformation. These gaps need to be identified and filled by other social actors. The current socioeconomic condition of China has become the breeding ground for new civil actors such as NGOs to provide public goods (He, 2008).

1.2. NGO capacity can be enhanced by public relations

Since the 1990s, Chinese NGOs have grown rapidly both in their number and activity scope. By 2004, there were 289,000 registered NGOs in China (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2004). As noted by DeMars (2005), NGOs are private actors pursuing public goods. In other words, NGOs are not created to serve the interests of the owners or shareholders; they are organized to pursue a broad or public purpose "based on universal human (or species) rights and needs" (p. 41). NGOs are unelected entities that can be organized by any social actor as long as the actor claims to serve public interests. NGOs, in many countries, include more complicated membership than their labels imply. For example, state governments may organize NGOs to fulfill certain functions or mining corporations may organize NGOs to challenge environmentalists. Therefore, being a NGO does not automatically privilege an organization with the power to influence social affairs. NGOs must work to gain that privilege and they face a constant problem of legitimacy. Their public relations efforts help to build legitimacy.

Chinese NGOs, when categorized by the type of organizers or founders, can be divided into three types. The first type is *official-organized NGOs/Top-down NGOs*. These NGOs are initiated by the government, therefore are also called GNGOs. GNGOs receive government subsidies, and personnel in the leadership positions are generally appointed by the government. In the last 10 years, some GNGOs have become more independent in terms of program management and fund-raising. However, many still have mixed identities and continue to primarily serve government interests (He, 2008).

The second type of Chinese NGO is called, *popular NGOs/Bottom-up NGOs*. This type of NGO is initiated by private citizens (Li, 2006). Popular NGOs are similar to their Western counterparts, and many of them are "organized around marginalized interests" (Lu, 2008, p. 90), such as responding to HIV/AIDS, promoting labor right, women rights, environmental protection, and taking care of senior citizens.

The third type of NGOs include *student NGOs*. According to a study conducted in eight cities of China, most student NGOs are initiated by college students (Lu & Yan, 2000). All student NGOs are university based, and mostly focus on environmental

protection related activities. Student NGOs are different from the GNGOs and popular NGOs in the following aspects. First, the leadership positions can be filled either by elected or appointed students, and their activities are supervised by specific professors of their respective universities. Second, core personnel in the student NGOs usually serve 10–12 months. This service period on average is shorter than people working in GNGOs or popular NGOs. Third, members of student NGOs are college students. They generally participate in activities during their free time. On the one hand, many of them are savvy users of new media who are interested in utilizing the Internet to build up broader partnerships with other social actors. On the other hand, due to limited funding (mainly from university funding, government projects and other foundation), time, and experiences, their activities are constrained.

Currently, environmental NGOs (ENGOS hereafter) are the most active NGOs in China (Li, 2006). ENGOS have been credited for “stimulated the civil movements in China” (Lee, 2007, p. 270). ENGOS have actively engaged in and promoted programs that provide citizens various opportunities to participate in civil activities. ENGO activities are diverse for several reasons. First, China has paid heavy environmental price for its rapid industrialization. The public outcries over environmental problems have raised the public awareness of environmental issues, and many people are supportive of environmental friendly activities. Second, since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, the government has remained cautious about civil groups. Environmental activities have been viewed as less politically relevant, and therefore face fewer regulation barriers. Environmental activism appears to be a safe way for citizens to organize and work for change in China.

1.3. Chinese NGOs use the Internet for relationship-building

Many communication and public relations scholars noticed the co-evolution of the Internet and the rise of NGOs' power. Warkentin (2001) argued the Internet facilitates NGOs' development on two levels. First, characteristics of the Internet such as interactivity may facilitate the development of a global network of social relationships. Via the Internet, NGOs can more easily reach out to partners across countries. Second, “as coexisting phenomena, the Internet and global civil society reinforce each other in an ongoing manner” (p. 32). For example, Yang (2003) observed that in China, the Internet provides new opportunities for citizens to increase their social capital, develop trust, and collaborate with others. As the civil society grows, it further stimulates citizens needs to communicate and cooperate with each other both online and offline. Therefore, civil society is in turn facilitated by the adoption of the Internet and grows through the popularization of online activities. This dynamic relationship was also evident in the Earthquake relief activities in 2008, when millions of volunteers were mobilized online by Chinese NGOs (Kang & Sun, 2008).

American public relations scholars have studied the use of the Internet for NGOs, activist organizations, and non-profit organizations (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Kent and Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006). These authors have argued that website design can help facilitate relationships if it follows certain patterns. As noted by Yang (2005), many Chinese ENGOS have utilized the Internet to extend their activism practices yet little research has been conducted to explore how Chinese ENGOS design their websites for communicating information and relationship-building.

1.3.1. Communicating information

NGOs collect and disseminate specialized information. NGOs collect first-hand information from different sources, and use such information to influence decision-making processes. Websites may emerge as a tactical choice for Chinese ENGOS to avoid confrontational activities against the government (Yang, 2009). Recognizing constraints, most ENGOS mainly focus on using educational methods (e.g. lectures, workshop, publication, etc.) to raise public awareness of environmental problems. In China, the state still has considerable influence over mass media (Zhao, 1998). Messages that are inconsistent with mainstream ideology may have a hard time getting into media channels. The Internet provides an ideal channel for ENGOS, who typically lack access to other communication channels such as mass media, to reach out to the general public, and to provide more detailed and comprehensive environmental information. Further, as more and more Chinese ENGOS are extending their activities to new areas and are in need of new members and funding, the adoption of websites may potentially open up more opportunities to gain human and financial resources.

1.3.2. Relationship-building design

It is important for NGOs to use their websites for relationship-building (Reber & Kim, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001). Dialogue has been emerging as a key word in the public relations literature (Taylor et al., 2001). It emphasizes the simultaneous creation of meaning (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Kent and Taylor, 2002). Dialogue could promote feelings of mutual control, satisfaction, and commitment (Reber & Kim, 2006). The dialogue between organization and the public, therefore, helps to effectively build beneficial and long-time collaboration. The websites of NGOs, according to the dialogic perspective, should be designed to generate such dialogic relationships between NGOs and the public.

Taylor et al. (2001) identified five dialogic principles of organization websites: dialogic loops, ease of interface, conservation of visitors, generation of return visits, and providing information relevant to a variety of publics (p. 266). Further, Taylor et al. (2001) developed a set of questions to assess these dialogic variables. This instrument was then adopted with modifications by other studies to examine governmental websites (Taylor and Kent, 2004), watch dog organization websites (Kent et al., 2003), activist group websites' online press rooms (Reber & Kim, 2006). Kang and Norton (2004) concluded that the five principles may be combined into three dimensions: the ease of interaction, the usefulness of information, and the facilitation of relationship-building. First, the ease of interaction dimension addresses how easily visitors can navigate

on the websites. Interactivity is an important concept in the website research literature (Kent et al., 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006). Interaction is essential to the building of relationships (Yeon et al., 2005). Visitor interactions with a website could affect visitors' attitudes and involvement levels with the website. Such positive attitudes may motivate people to join the organization or support the issue (Yeon et al., 2005). To assess the interaction features of Chinese ENGOS, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How do Chinese ENGOS' websites incorporate features that facilitate interaction?

Second, the usefulness of information dimension refers to the amount of relevant information provided by NGOs' websites. Websites can provide highly customized environments, and can offer audiences information that is not only available at their convenience, but could be shaped to cater to their preferences. A well designed website can greatly serve the needs of information-seeking audiences. For NGOs, pertinent publics can be volunteers, members, the general public, and the media. Providing information to the media is very important for enhancing NGOs' social influence. In fact, many NGOs' influence is limited by the problem of low visitation rates to their websites and minimal media coverage of their issue.

Many journalists go online to gather information. NGOs' websites can be a powerful and convenient platform to exchange information with journalists. NGOs may not yet fully recognize and maximize using their websites to influence the mass media. Reber and Kim (2006) found that among 74 NGOs' websites, only one-third included an online press room. In order to examine if and how Chinese ENGOS' websites are providing relevant information to pertinent publics, the following question was posed:

RQ2: How do Chinese ENGOS' websites provide information to key stakeholders (members, volunteers, general public, and the media)?

Third, it is important to examine the level of relationship-building on websites. This feature also helps to enhance the visitors' level of involvement with the NGOs' websites. The level of involvement is especially important for mobilizing volunteer actions and donations online (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Research found that, in the U.S., although many organizations have websites, not all organizations have incorporated relationship-building features into their website design. The next research question assesses how Chinese ENGOS' websites can serve relationship-building functions.

RQ3: How do Chinese ENGOS' websites incorporate relationship-building features?

Bowen (2005) has noted that mission statements are a crucial part of organizational behavior. NGOs' mission statements have the following basic functions. Mission statements reflect the reasons that mobilized the founders to form an organization, they help to legitimize and justify the NGO's activities and often serve as the rationale for tax breaks and other special policies and they attract partners. Mission statements may be the glue that binds groups of NGOs together. Eventually, as more and more ENGOS emerge in China, organizations will need to differentiate themselves from others. Mission statements may become even more valuable overtime for Chinese ENGOS.

Mission statements can reflect two potential perspectives: (1) the grassroots perspective where NGOs appoint themselves to represent the interests of marginalized groups; and (2) the moral authority perspective where NGOs refer to moral authorities above the state (DeMars, 2005). The *grassroots perspective mission statement* is characterized by referring to the interests of specific marginalized or socially disadvantaged groups. To fulfill such a mission, NGOs should place their positions on the behalf of marginalized interests. Sometimes such a position requires NGOs to challenge the authorities. For example, Downey and Fention (2003) observed that during the Third Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO), NGOs used their websites to protest against globalization, and their websites received an estimated 1.5 million hits during the week of the conference.

For NGOs to state their missions from the *moral authority perspective*, NGOs may use their websites to promote certain values or beliefs. Such mission statements may contain more general and abstract information when compared to the grassroots perspective. They are valuable because they help to attract broader interests. The level to which NGOs incorporate mission statements into their websites may not only reflect their understanding of the function of their mission, but also reveal to what extent NGOs in China are willing to demonstrate their opinions and voices. To assess how Chinese ENGOS' incorporated mission statement in their websites, the following research question is posited:

RQ4: Which mission statement perspectives are present on Chinese ENGOS' websites?

Finally, while extensive research exists about how Western ENGOS (especially American ENGOS) have utilized their websites for the aforementioned functions, it is also valuable to compare Western ENGOS' websites and Chinese ENGOS' websites. Since few studies have explored the features of Chinese ENGOS' websites, the comparison will help to benchmark the development level of Chinese ENGOS' websites.

RQ5: What are the differences and similarities between Chinese ENGOS' websites and American ENGOS' websites?

2. Method

This study utilized website content analysis to examine Chinese ENGOS' websites. The access to these websites was found from a website named *Chinese Environmental NGOs Online*. The *Chinese Environmental NGOs Online* (www.greengo.cn) is by far the most comprehensive information resource about Chinese ENGOS. To date, 151 ENGOS from the Mainland China are registered as members of this website. Among these NGOs, nine are national in scope, and 142 represent 29 different provinces and municipalities.

Table 1Measures and comparison between American NGOs and Chinese NGOs' websites features^a.

Categories measured in this study	Percentage of American NGOs' websites provided this feature	Percentage of Chinese NGOs' websites provided this feature
Easy of interaction (3 items, alpha = .48)		
Site map	20.3	10.3
Major link to rest of site	78.4	94.1
Search engine box	40.5	41.2
Usefulness of information to members/volunteers (5 items, alpha = .49)		
Details of how to become affiliated	35.1	61.8
How to contribute money	48.6	48.5
Links (email, telephone) to organization leaders	–	14.7
Chat room/BBS/Blog	9.5	51.5
Links to affiliate websites	56.8	69.1
Usefulness of information to general public (3 items, alpha = .68)		
Tips of how to practice environmentally friendly activities in everyday life (e.g. recycling, energy saving)	–	41.2
Tips of how to lead a healthy life (e.g. identify organic food)	–	33.8
Games and other entertainment function	–	13.2
Usefulness of information to the media (11 items, alpha = .70)		
Press release room/search engine	32.4	33.8
FAQ section aimed at media	8.1	0
News published or aired about the organization	47.3	44.1
Editorial stories written by organization staff	33.8	23.7
Organization-in-action photos/stories	17.6	55.7
Downloadable graphics/video/other material	28.4	55.9
Organization fact sheets	–	55.2
Organization logos for use in publication	–	82.4
Clearly stated position on policy issues	–	29.4
Organization perspective on current issues/trends	31.1	73.6
Annual reports/financial	–	48.5
Relationship-building (5 items, alpha = .46)		
Opportunity for user-response	31.1	38.2
Opportunity to vote on issues	5.4	5.9
Survey to voice opinion on issues	8.1	10.3
Offers regular information through email	37.8	19.1
Positing calendar of events	33.8	23.5
Mission statement		
Statement of mission/organization value/goals from a moral authority perspective	–	50.0
Statement of mission/organization value/goals from a grassroots perspective	–	44.1
N	74	68

^a Some of the items measured in the current study are missing in the study about American ENGOS.

2.1. Measures

To assess the previously discussed features of Chinese ENGOS' websites, Table 1 shows how Taylor et al.'s (2001) instrument was adopted with amendments from the following studies (Callison, 2003; Perry and Bodkin, 2002; Yeon et al., 2005). The ease of interaction dimension is assessed by the absence or presence of a site map, search engine, or links. The usefulness of information to the members and volunteers is measured by questions such as whether the website provides detailed information about how to become affiliated. The usefulness of information to the general public is assessed by questions such as whether the website provides information helpful for people to practice environmentally friendly/healthy activities in their everyday life. The usefulness of information to the media is accessed by questions such as whether the website has its own online press release room.

To examine if ENGOS' websites incorporated features that facilitate relationship-building, we coded for calendar of events on the website, opportunities for interaction or feedback. Finally, we looked at the mission statements to identify their perspective (see Table 1 for details).

Whether a website function has been placed on the front page may also affect how easily visitors can use this function (Yeon et al., 2005). Therefore, in addition to coding all the above discussed items for presence/absence, this study also considers the location of a function within a website. Following Yeon et al. (2005), the level of prominence for each function was examined by how easily it can be reached through the front page. For each item: 1 = absence, 2 = linked through at least three levels of hyperlinks from the front page, 3 = linked through at least two levels of hyperlinks from the front page, 4 = placed on front page. In addition to website features, the area of ENGOS' focus and ENGOS types (in terms of the ENGOS creators: government, citizens, and students) were also coded as grouping variables for statistical analysis.

In order to measure the reliability of the coding scheme, two coders independently coded 20% of the research sample. The aforementioned 29 different coding variables were examined for reliability. The reliability coefficients, as measured by

Scott's Pi, ranged from .77 to 1.00 ($M = .84$). After computing the intercoder reliability, the two coders further refined the coding scheme and then coded the sample.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptives

Of the 151 websites identified from the website *Chinese Environmental NGOs Online*, 83 (55%) either had bad links or led to sites that were not actually the sites for the registered websites. Overall, 68 (45%) websites were identified and further coded. The data for this study only analyze organizations that had functioning websites. Among websites coded, the majority are ($n = 40$, 58.8% of the sample) ENGOs specialized in environmental education. The second most common type of ENGOs is those that focus on rural communities (10 websites were found, 14.7% of the sample). Other ENGOs that focus on areas such as environmental health (1.3%), environmental policy and rights protection (3.3%), survey and research (1.3%), and resources protection (1.9%) tend to have only one or two websites. Among the 68 websites analyzed, 12 are Governmental NGOs (GNGOs), 8 are student NGOs and 48 are popular NGOs.

3.2. Website design features

RQ1 inquired: "How do Chinese ENGOs' websites incorporate features that facilitate interaction?" The data suggest that only 10.3% websites included a site map on the front page, and the majority, 79.4% websites do not have a site map. Many websites (57.4%) also do not provide a search engine box, while 41.2% of the websites placed the search engine box on the front page. Most websites (94.1%) provide major links to the rest of site on their front page, and only a few websites (5.9%) place major links two or three layers deeper than the front page. To facilitate further analysis, these three items were computed into a new variable: ease of interface ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .70$, $\alpha = .48$). In order to compare that whether an ENGO is a GNGO, a popular NGO or a student NGOs significantly affects the mean value of ease of interface, a one-way ANOVA was performed. One-way ANOVA allows the simultaneous comparison of the means of two or more groups without inflating the type I error (Williams, 1992). No significant difference was found ($F(2, 65) = 1.961$, $p > .05$) among the three types of ENGOs' websites in terms of ease of interface. However, student NGOs' websites had higher means ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .58$) than either the GNGOs ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .57$), and popular NGOs ($M = 2.45$, $SD = .73$). It appears that student NGOs' websites are somewhat easier to navigate.

RQ2 asked: "How do Chinese ENGOs' websites provide information to key stakeholders including members/volunteers, the general public and the media?" The content analysis assessed how ENGOs' websites cater to their members' needs, whether a website has information such as how to become member and donate money, how to contact leaders of organizations, and links to other organizations. Among the websites analyzed, only 14.7% of the websites placed information about membership on the front page; 39.7% placed this information on two layers down from the front page; and an equal amount, 38.2% do not include this information on their sites at all. The same situation was found in examined donation information. Only 11.8% of the websites put information about how to donate on the front page; 36.8% placed this information on two or three layers deeper from the front page. Surprisingly, 51.5% do not include donation information anywhere on their sites. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for relationship between the information for membership and donations. The Pearson correlation coefficient indexes both the magnitude of relationship between variables and the direction of the relationship (Williams, 1992). A strong positive correlation ($r = .628$, $p < .01$) was found, indicating that websites that do not provide information about membership also do not provide information about donations. This finding suggests that many ENGOs do not use their websites to recruit member and attract donations. Most websites (69.1%) place links to affiliated websites on their front pages; and most website (51.5%) set chat room/BBS on two layers deeper from the front page. Surprisingly, the majority (85.3%) of websites surveyed do not provide contact information for organization leaders, and only 2.9% of the websites placed leader information on the front page. These are not personality driven ENGOs—the leaders are not driving the organization's image.

The five items were further composed into a new variable: information availability for members ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .58$, $\alpha = .49$) to facilitate further analysis. A one-way ANOVA tested if organization type (GNGO, popular NGO and student NGOs) significantly affects the information availability for members on their websites. No significant difference was found ($F(2, 65) = .784$, $p > .05$) among the three types of ENGOs' websites in terms of information availability for members. However, student NGOs' websites had higher means ($M = 2.49$, $SD = .64$) than both the GNGOs ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .57$), and popular NGOs ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .58$).

The general public is a key audience for these websites. Among the websites analyzed, nearly half (41.2%) provide information and tips on practical environmental activities that can be carried out by individuals in their daily life. More than one-third (33.8%) provided tips on healthy life style choices. The websites appear to be serving an information and education function for their publics.

The three items were further composed into a new variable: information availability for the public ($M = 2.00$, $SD = .91$, $\alpha = .68$). A one-way ANOVA tested if organization type (GNGO, popular NGO and student NGOs) significantly affects the information availability for the public on their websites. Significant difference was found ($F(2, 65) = 4.72$, $p < .05$) among the three types of ENGOs' websites in terms of information availability for members. Tukey's HSD was used to determine the

nature of the differences between groups. Tukey's HSD is widely used for testing the significance of pairwise comparisons (Williams, 1992). This analysis reveals that Student NGOs' websites ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .87$) provide significantly less information for the public than GNGOs ($M = 2.5$, $SD = .89$). Together with the previously discussed finding that student NGOs are most likely to provide information for their members, this finding may suggest that Student NGOs' websites are designed more for attracting members such as other students than for serving the general public. GNGOs, on the other hand, since they are sponsored by the government and more or less function to build a positive image of the government, tend to incorporate features that target the general public.

The media is also a key public for the environmentalists. Media coverage can help to extend the discussion of the environmental issues advocated by the NGOs. Among the websites surveyed, the most frequent front page level information for media is organization logos (82.4%). The second most popular front page level information is organization-in-action stories and photos (55.7%). News published about the organization is also frequently placed on the front page (44.1%). The majority (55.9%) of websites analyzed placed downloadable graphic/video on two or three layers deeper from the front page. Organizational perspective pieces on current environmental issues are evenly spread on different pages. About one quarter websites (29.4%) put organization perspective pieces on the front page, one quarter (22.1%) posted these stories two layers deeper from front pages and one quarter (22.1%) had them posted three layers deeper. Although a third (33.8%) provided a press release room on the front page, the majority (51.5%) did not include a press release room on their websites. None of these websites have a FAQ section aimed at media. More than half (55.9%) of the NGOs placed organization fact sheets somewhere on their websites, however, close to half of these NGOs (44.1%) do not provide this information. As for annual financial report, only half (48.5%) of these NGOs placed this information somewhere on their websites.

The 11 items were further composed into a new variable: information availability for the media ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .49$, $\alpha = .70$). A one-way ANOVA tested if organization type (GNGO, popular NGO and student NGOs) significantly affects the information available for the media on their websites. Significant differences were found ($F(2, 65) = 6.598$, $p < .01$) among the three types of ENGOS' websites in terms of information availability for members. Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences between groups. This analysis reveals that Student NGOs' website ($M = 2.15$, $SD = .44$) provide significantly less information for the media than GNGOs ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .52$). This finding further suggests that Student NGOs' websites have a limited influence on media, while GNGOs tend to attract more public attention and media coverage. Again, their target audience may be an influential factor in their website design.

The Internet and organizational websites provide NGOs with an opportunity to do more than merely inform a variety of publics. Websites can be designed to build relationships with publics. RQ3 asked: "How do Chinese ENGOS' websites incorporate relationship-building functions?" The findings suggest that most ENGOS have yet to capitalize on the relationship-building potential of their websites. The majority (94.1%) did not provide an opportunity for visitors to vote on issues. The majority (89.7%) of websites surveyed neither provide surveys to solicit visitors' opinions, nor do they offer regular information through email (80.9%). About one quarter (23.5%) of the websites have placed calendars of events on their front page. The majority of ENGOS (61.8%) do not provide an opportunity for users to respond to information on the sites.

Five items were further composed into a new variable: relationship-building functions ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .53$, $\alpha = .46$). A one-way ANOVA tested if organization type (GNGO, popular NGO and student NGOs) significantly affects the information available for the public on their websites. Significant differences were found ($F(2, 65) = 4.55$, $p < .05$) among the three types of ENGOS' websites in terms of information availability for members. Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences between groups. This analysis reveals that popular NGOs' websites ($M = 1.97$, $SD = .69$) are designed with more functions to facilitate relationship-building than GNGOs ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .30$). This finding suggests that popular NGOs are more aware of the relationship-building function of their websites when compared with other types of NGOs. As membership based organizations, NGOs may cater to the information needs of their primarily stakeholders. For popular NGOs that rely on donation and volunteers, maintaining good relationships with members and the public is especially important. GNGOs may not have this imperative given their close relationship to government.

3.3. Mission statements

Organizational mission statements provide a NGO with the opportunity to plan their long-term development and help the public to evaluate their performance. RQ4 inquired: "How do Chinese ENGOS' websites incorporate mission statements?" The findings suggest that most ENGOS have omitted the mission statement from their websites. The majority do not have a mission statement either from a moral authority perspective or grassroots perspective. Over one-third (36.7%) of the websites placed their mission statement from the authority perspective on two or three layers deeper from the front page; and another one-third (30.9%) placed their mission statement from grassroots perspective on two or three layers deeper from the front page. For both of authority and grassroots perspective, 13.2% websites place their mission statement on front page. Mission statements help to legitimize and justify NGOs' activities and often serve as standard for evaluation of NGOs' performance. Further, mission statements are a powerful public relations tool that helps NGOs to extend their relationship network. This finding suggests Chinese ENGOS may not be fully aware of the symbolic value of the mission statement.

3.4. Similarities among ENGOS from China and the USA

RQ5 directs attention to the differences and similarities between Chinese ENGOS' websites and American ENGOS' websites. Reber and Kim (2006) surveyed 74 environmental activism websites in the U.S. A comparison was made between Reber and Kim's finding and results from this study to provide a benchmark for understanding the current status of Chinese ENGOS. Considerable similarities were found in American and Chinese ENGOS' websites' incorporation of functions that facilitate the ease of interaction and relationship-building (see Table 1 for details).

As for providing information to their members, a similar situation about donation information and membership information was found both in the U.S. and China. The biggest difference between Chinese and American ENGOS is their different attitudes toward forums and BBS chat rooms. BBS has been reported as a very popular website feature in China and it facilitates the building of a virtual community (Yang, 2009). While Reber and Kim (2006) found only 9.5% websites provided forums or BBS in the U.S., Chinese ENGOS are more enthusiastic about providing forums or BBS. Half of the websites surveyed (51.5%) placed BBS or forums within the top two layers of their front pages. This comparison may reveal a cultural difference between the U.S. and Chinese contexts. This finding may suggest that BBS can be a powerful public relations tool for Chinese NGOs for building of relationship. As for the provision of information for media, a similar situation about providing online press rooms was found both in the U.S. and China. The largest difference between American and Chinese ENGOS' websites was that Chinese ENGOS tend to provide more downloadable material, organization-in-action stories, and organization perspective pieces. This feature may fit better with the Chinese ENGOS' educational purposes. The next section of this article contextualizes these findings and discusses the implications of the findings for public relations theory and online activism.

4. Discussion

There is an emergent literature about Chinese public relations via the Internet (Maynard & Tian, 2004; Pan & Xu, 2009) but to date, few studies have studied activists' websites. Our findings provide a picture of the early years of the Chinese environmental movement and the use of the Internet in their advocacy. Four findings emerged from this study that deserve further discussion.

4.1. Levels of accepted activism in China may shape tactics on websites

First, the data suggest that Chinese ENGOS have begun to recognize the importance of adopting websites as a public relations tool. Taylor et al. (2001), Kent et al. (2003) and Reber and Kim (2006) provided an American baseline of environmental activists' website usage. This Chinese sample selected for this study shows that 45% of the environmental NGOs actually have their own websites. Given their relatively short history of development, this is a promising figure for Chinese NGOs.

Remember that China is still a semi-authoritarian country and communication is often monitored. We may be seeing a new "cultural and political" type of activism emerging in China. The literature review and the findings of this study suggest that many Chinese ENGOS began to use their respective websites as alternative channels to advocate civil activities, to share opinions, and to mobilize voluntary participation. The websites educate people but stop short of activating people against the government and large corporations. Missed advocacy may be due to the political environment that forces the most active users of the Internet among Chinese ENGOS to specialize in environmental education, not environmental advocacy. This situation may partly due to the fact that environmental activities are relatively new to millions of Chinese. However, given the fact that fewer ENGOS specialize in the more sensitive areas such as environmental policy and environmental rights protection, and these ENGOS keep low profiles even in cyberspace, it is possible that the social and political environment of China has shaped the scope and design of Chinese ENGOS' websites.

The diffusion of the Internet and communication technology to developing countries has offered Southern NGOs new opportunities to develop in such a way as to not directly challenge or confront government power. In other words, Chinese ENGO websites reflect a culturally appropriate way to talk about issues. While their websites do not follow the prescriptive design outlined by Kent and Taylor for building dialogue, they are doing what is possible at this time for their own level of development. They are perhaps *educating* as a precursor to *activating*.

4.2. Resource dependency influences public relations tactics

Previous public relations research has suggested that organizational type will influence website design (Kent et al., 2003; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009). An organization's perceived level of dependency or interest in its publics will influence how dialogic it is with its publics. For instance, organizations that are heavily dependent on their publics often have more dialogic sites. The findings suggest that among three types of Chinese ENGOS: Popular NGOs, Governmental NGOs (GNGOs), student NGOs, popular NGOs are the most likely to incorporate relationship-building functions in their websites.

This study found that three types of Chinese ENGOS have begun to develop their own unique website design patterns. Among these NGOs' websites, student NGOs' websites tend to be more likely to provide information for members and design their websites in a way that is easy to navigate. These websites may be reflecting the education and interests of their leaders/members. Younger people are often faster adopters of new technologies and young people involved in higher

education naturally see the Internet as a place for sharing information. Student NGOs are interested in gaining student members and attracting student media. It makes sense that they would be interested in what their target public thinks and would integrate more interactivity (a major feature of dialogue and relationship-building) into their websites.

GNGOs appear to provide the most information features for the media on their websites. This may be due to the fact that many Chinese media are still party media and follow the party line. GNGOs have been founded by the government, therefore they are more likely accepted by media (especially party media). GNGOs may take advantages of this fact, and gain more media exposure. Further studies can test if NGO type affects the amount of media coverage. Relationship-building is crucial to a NGO's development. This finding suggests that popular NGOs and student NGOs may develop partnerships with GNGOs to increase their chance of attracting media attention. Given the fact that some GNGOs have become increasingly independent in terms of program management and fund-raising, partnerships with GNGOs may create a win-win situation for both GNGOs and other types of NGOs. Even *globally-focused* Northern NGOs that work in China (such as the World Wildlife Fund) may consider developing enhanced partnerships with GNGOs to advance their *local* influence.

4.3. How can you achieve your mission if no one knows your mission?

A third finding details some of the missed public relations opportunities in the design of Chinese ENGO sites. Mission statements guide organizational behavior and they allow for "the formation of long-term relationships with publics and stakeholders. These groups know what to expect from an organization and come to trust and rely up on the organization" (Bowen, 2005, p. 536). This study found that the majority of websites surveyed lack mission statements from any perspective. Given the importance of mission statements in promoting and legitimizing the unique identity of NGOs, Chinese ENGOs should assign more importance to promoting their mission statements to their key publics. This may be especially important for Chinese NGOs since they are relatively new social actors in the Chinese society, and the public has limited understanding of the roles and goals of NGOs.

Further, given the fact that the low level to which NGOs emphasize mission statements on their websites may reveal the extent to which Chinese NGOs are willing to demonstrate their opinions and voices. This finding may suggest that Chinese ENGOs are still cautious and avoid attracting government attention. The situation may be improved as the political sphere increasingly becomes more dynamic and tolerant of activism.

4.4. Missed information subsidies to the media

Recent research has shown that journalists all over the world are getting more and more of their information from the web (Middleberg, 2009). A major public relations function of any website is to provide information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) to journalists. When an organization or issue is covered in the press, it extends the reach of the organization and allows it to participate in the agenda setting function of the media. Further, alternative information collection and dissemination is essential to NGOs to attract public attention and gain legitimacy (Bach & Stark, 2004). The fourth finding suggests that it is unlikely that journalists can be satisfied with their experience with the websites of most of these ENGOs. Only one-third (33.8%) of the sample provided an online press release room. Given that Chinese NGOs in general are still relatively unknown to the Chinese people, providing an online press release room and posting high quality press releases makes good public relations sense. The same is true for their American counterparts. Though the Chinese data about information subsidies to the media are disappointing, Reber and Kim (2006) found that there is a similar situation in the U.S. (where activism has a longer history). This finding suggests that NGOs' lack of public relations skills is a widely existing phenomenon across nations. It points to an increased need for collaboration between those public relations researchers who study relationship-building and the organizations that need to enact relationship-building to accomplish their missions.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a quantitative benchmark that will allow us to track evolving Chinese ENGOs' mediated public relations efforts. While we know that today's ENGO websites are mostly used for *educational* rather than *activation* communication, it will be interesting to watch to see if ENGO websites evolve as the political system evolves in China. The different features of the websites identified from these different types of ENGOs also deserve attention. This research reveals that the study of websites should be situated in their social, political and relational environment. For instance, the political system, media environment, and dependency relationships may all affect the design of organizational websites.

This study does have shortcomings that need to be mentioned. This study treated each website as isolated units, while in fact these websites are interconnected and interdependent. Important network relationships between ENGOs are not captured in the current study, and they are worthy of exploring in the future. Finally, the sample reflects only those organizations with websites. Yet, these minor limitations do not diminish the value of this study to show the early years of the Chinese environmental movement, the use of the Internet in an educational form of advocacy, and the potential for improved communication and relationship-building via the web.

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