

# Union and Communist Party Influences on the Environment in China

## L'influence des syndicats et du parti communiste sur l'environnement en Chine

## La influencia de los sindicatos y del Partido Comunista en el medio ambiente en China

Majid Ghorbani, Morley Gunderson and Byron Y. S. Lee

Volume 74, Number 3, Summer 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065172ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065172ar>

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Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ghorbani, M., Gunderson, M. & Lee, B. Y. S. (2019). Union and Communist Party Influences on the Environment in China. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 74(3), 552–576. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065172ar>

### Article abstract

We examine the ways in which two major and related governmental institutions of China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and government controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), exert different effects on the attitudes and behaviour of people toward the environment. Our motivation is to see which institution is more effective in making individuals 'aware' of environmental issues, expressing a 'willingness to pay' to alleviate the problems, and ultimately to 'act' on the issue by altering their behaviour.

Based on theories of planned behaviour and social learning, we hypothesize that membership in the CPC as well as in the ACFTU fosters an 'awareness' of environmental problems and a 'willingness to make a sacrifice' to protect the environment, but that members of the ACFTU are more likely than members of the CPC to act on the issue by altering their behaviour.

We test our hypothesis based on a nationally representative sample ( $n = 3112$ ) from the 2010 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Our results indicate that both the Party and the union have positive effects on 'awareness' and 'willingness to pay', but the union effect is generally stronger and only it (and not the Party) affects individual behaviour toward protecting the environment.

Unions in China are generally regarded as having little or no independent power to organize workers and engage in free collective bargaining. Their role is to foster harmony between workers and employers and to co-opt grassroots actions, wildcat strikes and the growth of independent unions, all in the interest of fostering stability and growth. While this is undoubtedly the case, our results are consistent with an emerging view of a more variegated picture of Chinese trade unions that highlights some more positive elements, in our case, fostering 'actions' to improve the environment in China.

# Union and Communist Party Influences on the Environment in China

Majid Ghorbani, Morley Gunderson and Byron Y. S. Lee

**Using a nationally representative sample ( $n=3112$ ), we examine the ways in which two major and related governmental institutions of China, the Party and national union, could exert different effects on the attitude and behaviour of people toward the environment. While administratively the union is under the Party, we find differences between the two government institutions. Our results indicate that both the Party and union have a positive and generally significant effect on the attitudes of their members, but only the union effect is significant for individual behaviour directed at protecting the environment. Moreover, the union effect is much stronger than that of the Party in attitudes and especially in taking action to improve the environment. We outline reasons for this finding to enhance our knowledge of the impact of different human resource institutions in China on their members.**

**KEYWORDS:** China, environment, institutions, unions, Communist Party of China, attitudes, behaviour.

## Introduction

Recent literature has indicated the need for unions to support and adopt socially responsible practices, with empirical evidence indicating that unions have made a positive impact in this area (Hyman, 2001; Schaefer and Kerrigan, 2008; Turnbull, 2003). The importance of the environment has been considered a part of the core mission of some unions in Western societies (Gereluk and Royer,

Majid Ghorbani, Associate Professor, Business School, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China (majidghorbani@gmail.com).

Morley Gunderson, Professor, Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, and Department of Economics, University of Toronto (morley.gunderson@utoronto.ca). He is also Research Associate of the Centre for International Studies, and the Institute for Human Development, Life Course and Aging, of the University of Toronto, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Byron Y. S. Lee, Assistant Professor, China Europe International Business School (CEIBS), Shanghai, China (blee@ceibs.edu).

*Nota bene:* Authors are listed in alphabetical order by surname and have made an equal contribution to this paper.

*Acknowledgements:* Majid Ghorbani would like to acknowledge financial support from the Natural Sciences Foundation of China (No. 71472184). Morley Gunderson and Byron Y. S. Lee would like to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Insight Grant for financial support.

2001) and a key social issue (Silverman, 2006). Consequently, we examine the impact of unionization on the environment and pollution control, a topic that for the most part represents a research gap in Party-state as well as capitalist economies (Markey *et al.*, 2016; Riisgaard, 2005).

It is well known that private competitive markets do not automatically consider the social costs of polluting the environment in their business decisions. In economic parlance, pollution is an externality that negatively affects consumers or other producers and the market does not automatically factor in such costs into the price of the product (Ayres and Kneese, 1969). Government intervention is merited in such forms as regulating the extent of pollution or applying a Pigouvian tax (e.g., carbon tax) on such externalities (Lans Bovenberg and de Mooij, 1997).

Economies controlled by the Party-state should not have such *market* failures. Theoretically (and theoretically is the operative word), they can internalize the externality in their politically-determined allocation decisions. In China, for example, party members may be judged not only on their meeting of production and service targets, but also on the extent to which they internalize the costs of pollution in their production and service delivery decisions (Zheng and Kahn, 2017). Judging by the degree of pollution that prevails in China, this does not seem to be occurring. This could reflect the fact that, as the economy transitions into a more market-based economy, the Party-state loses its planning and directing capability and transactions are now predominantly shaped by market-determined prices (Clarke and Pringle, 2009, 2010; Hart-Landsberg, 2010) that would not incorporate negative pollution externalities. The Communist Party of China (CPC or the Party) has multiple goals and the goal of economic development is often more important than environmental protection (Zheng and Kahn, 2017). The political failure to deal with pollution in China tends to be as prominent as the market failure to do so in market economies.

Though the situation is improving, China is currently the most polluting country in the world in terms of the total carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other greenhouse gas emissions. Given the failure of policy to transform the situation (Christmann and Taylor, 2001), finding ways to bring about societal change and saving the global village from a potential disaster is of utmost importance. The CPC and Chinese government have pledged to work towards protecting the environment and creating a more sustainable ecosystem (Liu and Diamond, 2005). Important in this discussion is how the government is enacting this protection of the environment. We argue that this can be facilitated by the fact that China has institutions—the Communist Party and a Party controlled nation-wide official union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions or ACFTU (Warner, 2008a)—that theoretically could internalize the pollution externalities in their decision making. While there are

legitimate grounds for pessimism about the impact of the ACFTU in the collective bargaining relationship (Friedman and Kuruvilla, 2015), we argue that the vacuum created by not supporting workers in collective bargaining represents opportunities for the union in China to have a larger influence in broader societal outcomes, especially when these social outcomes are favoured or even commanded by the Chinese government.

The emphasis of the CPC and government officials on pollution reduction, as reflected in five-year plans, started increasing from the 2000s and has accelerated in recent years (Zheng and Kahn, 2017). The current President and leader of CPC, Xi Jinping, indicated (CCTV, 2013a) that China needs to build an ecological civilization and establish a strategic mission to leave a blue sky, green grounds, and clean water for future generations. These messages were subsequently echoed by the Party and labour unions throughout the country.

Given the unique relationship between the union and the CPC in China, our contribution is to investigate whether these institutions influence their members' attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. Previous literature has examined the link between political parties and societal attitudes and values (e.g. Green, 2013; Inglehart, 1997; Liu, Li-Li and McFedries, 2008; Selle and Svåsand, 1991), but there is a research gap with respect to investigating the resulting behavioural effect, specifically towards the environment and particularly in the Chinese context. This is doubly interesting in the context of China, because while the ACFTU is directly under the control of the CPC, we posit the former has a different type of impact on employees than the CPC. Building on the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1974), we examine differences in institutional impacts of the CPC and unions by delineating attitudes from behaviours with the perspective that social learning can provide a positive impact on environmental issues (Mol and Carter, 2006; Zheng and Kahn, 2017).

Specifically, we examine the extent to which *each* of these two institutions influences attitudes and behaviours related to environmental issues. The distinction between 'attitudes' to deal with the problem as expressed through a 'willingness to pay', and actual 'behaviours' to deal with the problem is important since expressing favorable intentions can simply involve "cheap talk", while actions that deal with environmental concerns is a behaviour of "walk-the-talk." Our focus on the two institutions of the unions and the CPC is a response to a research gap on comparing these two institutions (Cooke, 2014), in our case, to enhance our understanding of the impact of these two separate, yet interconnected, institutions which are central to the management of human resources on environmental attitudes and behaviours. By focusing on these two governmental institutions, we hope to contribute to finding ways to better mobilize employee involvement

in general, including through unions, which has been proven to be important in fostering pollution abatement in more developed Western economies (Markey *et al.*, 2016).

The remainder of the paper begins with the introduction of each of these two institutions in China and highlights some of the subtle differences between them. We then describe the differences in how these institutions function and explain their dissimilar impacts on 'attitudes' and 'behaviours' to improve the environment.

## The CPC in China

In China, the CPC is the primary political institution with membership from a broad cross-section of the population. Established in 1921, as at the end of 2017, the CPC contained about 89.6 million members (Zhang, 2018), far less than the ACFTU membership of 303 million members at the same point in time (Guo, 2018). The CPC is closely linked to, and almost synonymous with, the government in China (NCCPC, 2012). In many ways, we can say that the CPC oversees the government and approves all the laws and policies at all levels. For the past few decades, the President of China has held a dual role, also serving as the leader or the General Secretary of the CPC. All members of the Politburo Standing Committee (equivalent to the cabinet or inner legislative circle of the government) and almost all members of the National Congress (equivalent to the members of the parliament or congress as the legislative power) are also members of the CPC. All higher-ranking state, province, city, and county government officials are members of the party. Almost all State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are managed at the highest levels by the members of the CPC as are all upper-management positions of institutions supported by the government, such as universities and hospitals. In many state-owned and governmental institutions, there is a communist party office that oversees the human resource functions of its employees.

Given this close linkage between the CPC and the government, the party plays a key role in communicating the government's administrative decisions to workplace organizations (Child and Tse, 2001). Since members of the CPC have a strong influence within both government institutions and industry, party members can convey the government's messages and priorities to other members who are at lower levels of the hierarchy. The message and requirement of environmental sustainability have been considered as one of the highest priorities by the current and past governments and are strongly supported by the top leadership in China (CCTV, 2013a, 2013b; Liu and Diamond, 2005). Zheng and Kahn (2017) name major environmental protection policies that the party and government use to reduce pollution, namely: regulations involving command and control; incentives

for local officials at the national and regional levels; reduction in price distortions; and direct investment of government in the prioritized areas.

## Unions in China

Our discussion of unions in China focuses on the literature that sheds light on our research question dealing with the role of unions in informing individuals about environmental issues and inducing them to act on those issues. Unions in China are generally regarded as puppets of the Party-state with little or no independent power to organize workers and engage in free collective bargaining. Their role is to foster harmony between workers and employers and to co-opt grass roots actions, wildcat strikes and the growth of independent unions, all in the interest of fostering stability and growth. Statements to that effect are given, for example, in Clarke (2005: 5), Friedman and Lee (2010: 522), Liu (2010: 30), Liu and Li (2014: 30), Shen and Benson (2008: 231), and Zhang (2009: 213).

Liu and Kuruvilla (2016), indicate that while this perception is accurate, they also point out that, “[o]bservers paint a variegated picture of Chinese trade unions” (p. 187), and an alternative view is emerging that is more positive, involving such examples as union organizing, sectoral ACFTU collective bargaining, and representing a voice in national labour policy. Examples of the emerging literature that discusses the potentially more positive view of unions include: Chan *et al.* (2017), Liu and Kuruvilla (2016), Kuruvilla and Zhang (2016), Liu and Smith (2016), Nichols and Zhao (2010), Pringle (2011), Warner (2008b) and Zhu, Warner and Feng (2011). Our paper adds the notion that fostering actions to improve the environment is an additional positive role of unions in China.

In China, unions operate under a single nation-wide official union—the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)—which is controlled by the government and governed as a department within the structure of the Party and government (Cooke, 2014; Taylor and Li, 2007). Branches of the ACFTU are formed within a single workplace, usually in agreement with the employer (often under pressure from the government), who then appoints a union representative. According to the legal framework in China, the law requires all organizations with more than 25 employees to form labour unions under the ACFTU umbrella and to employ a fulltime union member (who is also often a Party member) and a part-time assistant for organizations with over 350 employees (*Trade Union Law*, 2001). However, this law is not strictly enforced, and smaller firms do not have to form unions, resulting in about 23 percent of the workforce being without unions by the end of 2017 (Guo, 2018).

Given that the ACFTU officially resides within the Party-state structure, their primary responsibility is not necessarily to ensure employees are appropriately

protected from the employer or represented in the firms' decision-making process. As a branch of the government, the ACFTU maintains its alignment with government objectives and actively works to prevent workers from engaging in conflict with their employers (Chen, 2016; Friedman and Kuruvilla, 2015) by acting as mediator instead of standing on the side of workers (Bieler and Lee, 2017).

This is related to the broader goals of the union, which is to understand and support the goals of the government (Taylor and Li, 2007) through its activities with employees. This was outlined early in Lenin's speech of the 1920s to the All-Russia Central Council of Trade Unions where he described the union role as that of a "transmission belt" to convey the message of the government to workers (Lenin, 1965) and China followed the same Leninist approach (Chen, 2016). Cooke (2008) finds that unions "play an important role in these enterprise culture building initiatives, especially in employee care programs, skill competitions and social events." (p. 304).

One of the core activities of unions in China is to emphasize the importance of government-directed policy to employees. This includes the importance of protecting the environment and corporate social responsibility, also a point of emphasis for unions in the West (Lillywhite, 2007). The broader social role of unions in Western democracies has been emphasized in several studies (e.g. Ackers and Payne, 1998; Campbell, 2007; Matten and Moon, 2008; Perry, 1995). This has been the case with environmental issues since they are closely tied with the health and well-being of workers, as well as enhancing the image of unions as a promoter of corporate social responsibility (Dawkins, 2010; Kojola, Xiao and McCright, 2014; Markey *et al.*, 2016; Richter, 2011; Silverman, 2006).

## Hypothesis Development

Since the unions convey the government's message and the Party sets those messages, one could expect the two to have the same effect on their members. However, we argue that due to the differences in the nature of these two formal institutions and the ways they transmit messages, particularly about the environment, each could, also, have a different impact on their members.

### Similar Impacts of CPC and AFCTU on Environmental Attitudes

We propose that both the CPC and ACFTU attempt to align employees' goals with the goals of the government (i.e. environmental protections). The Party has been using all channels to raise awareness of environmental issues and to emphasize the need to make sacrifices to deal with the problems (Child, Lu and

Tsai, 2007). Through the history of China's development toward protecting the environment, this message has been communicated through the formal CPC channels to all members and the general public. These messages emphasize the need for everyone to change their attitude toward the environment and sacrifice something to fix the issues China is facing. This message being handed down by CPC members means that they are certainly aware of the issues at hand and more willing to make sacrifices. A recent study by Xiao and colleagues (2013), based on a 2003 survey, suggests that attitudes towards the environment were stronger for party members than the general public.

This result is consistent with the position of the Party as a voice of the government, communicating the key messages of the government such as the importance of the environment to the public and private organizations around them. Following the message originating from the government and given this function of the members of the party, these members should be more aware of the focus on environmental issues and be willing to make sacrifices to protect the environment.

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** Membership to the CPC is positively associated with: a- an awareness of environmental problems; and b- a willingness to make a sacrifice to protect the environment, compared to non-members.

Membership in a union may also "foster awareness" of environmental issues given their role of "a transmission belt" to convey priorities of the government to workers. Because of their limited role in industrial action and bargaining for monetary gains, as well attempting to divert workers' attention from getting involved in collective bargaining (Chen, 2016; Chan *et al.*, 2017; Cooke, 2008), unions in China look for other places where they can make a difference in workers' lives, such as through the enhancement of health. Enhancing awareness of environmental issues is a logical part of the more general health and safety awareness (Lillywhite, 2007) and is an important priority for the government of China. Since the government of China has clearly placed the environment as a priority, the union is aware of these regulations and, hence, is likely to also follow their intentions. While unions' attention to health issues might be an order from the top or their way of diverting employees' attention from other important issues, nonetheless, it has some subsequent impact on their members.

Therefore, given the close link between the union and the government, it is reasonable to expect the union conveys the government's message that the environmental problems in China are serious and people should make sacrifices to fix the environmental issues. As such, the attitude of union members towards the environment should be affected so that members recognize the importance of the environment and state their willingness to take steps to fix this problem. The conveyance of this message encourages union members to have a raised



awareness of environmental issues and consider the prices to be paid for fixing the environmental problems as a priority area. Therefore, the ACFTU members are expected to not only be aware of environmental problems, but also to be more willing to make sacrifices to fix the problem:

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** Membership to the unions is positively associated with: a- an awareness of environmental problems; and b- a willingness to make a sacrifice to protect the environment, compared to non-members.

### **Differences between the CPC and ACFTU on Environmental Issues**

Impacting changes in individuals' attitudes towards the environment needs to result in behavioural change in order to be effective (Ajzen, 1991). In addition to making individuals aware of the importance of the environment (Mol and Carter, 2006), it is necessary to transfer such awareness to a subsequent change in behaviour to achieve the desired outcome (Ajzen, 1991; Loughland *et al.*, 2003).

Social learning theory indicates that people learn from each other's behaviour and practices by observing and doing what seems an appropriate action to them, be it good (Bandura, 1974; Winterich *et al.*, 2013) or bad actions (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). In groups and society, members learn the norms that are aligned with the culture of the group or organization (Clausen, 1968). These norms become the guiding principle for actions, especially in collectivistic cultures such as in China (Hofer *et al.*, 2010). Individuals learn what is expected from them and what is prohibited (e.g. Ghorbani *et al.*, 2013; Winterich *et al.*, 2013), with violating the norms potentially leading to negative consequences for the individual (Ajzen, 1991). While there might be some variation in the degree that the internalization of norms changes attitudes and the subsequent behaviour across cultures, in the context of China, social learning is much closer to behavioural change (Hofer *et al.*, 2010). The peer reinforcement, in general, prevents members from behaving against the norm in the organization.

Although technically CPC sets policies and the government mandates ACFTU to follow these policies, there are two major differences between the Party and unions that can result in behavioural change in members of one and not the other. First, there are differences in reasons for joining the Party and being a member of the union. Party members are not monolithic but consist of a diverse population from all walks of life with heterogeneous motivations. Party organizations at various levels, including grassroots units, can be effective in conveying the Party's directives and knowing about governmental objectives, regardless of their motivation to join the Party. However, anyone who wants to hold any position at any government or non-governmental organization would seriously consider joining the party (Bian, Shu and Logan, 2001).

Tsai and Dean (2014) indicate that members of the CPC are often groomed and nurtured from a young age for higher positions within the public or private sector or SOEs. Usually party members who have a desire to climb up the hierarchical ladder in the private or public sector have to undertake positions of lower importance before being appointed to more important posts (Bian, Shu and Logan, 2001). For instance, party members of regional or national level SOEs experience faster tracks to the positions of heads of departments, and only they ascend to the position of CEO or president. In the public sector, active members of the party at schools and districts gradually fill higher positions as district leader or town party secretary to get to higher positions. This gradual and careful progression is to ensure that the members are loyal to the party agenda and pursue the same goals as the CPC.

Conversely, the union is an institution that supposedly represents all workers within a firm regardless of rank, as long as a union has been formed in that particular workplace at the request of employees or ACFTU (Chan *et al.*, 2017). Membership in the ACFTU does not guarantee or disqualify a person for promotion, employment, or benefits (Cooke, 2008). As such, membership in the union is not associated with any substantial material reward and there are no gains within the firm from following the messages of the union.

This major difference between the CPC and ACFTU can have different impacts on the actual behaviours taken towards the environment. The CPC might be effective in making its members aware of the environmental issues because of the importance it is attaching to the environment of its members. As well, party members are likely to state an intended willingness to sacrifice to improve the environment because they are acculturated to repeat the key messages of the government and motivated by promotion. However, they are not necessarily acculturated or motivated to internalize their intentions and follow through with actual actions to improve the environment.

Second, socialization among party members and union members is different. For the most part, socialization among party members is often under the umbrella of the Party. CPC gatherings are informative up-down meetings where the message from the Party is passed on to the members to communicate to their respective departments, organizations or areas of responsibility. There is no real interaction among party members other than the formal topic of the meeting they attend. Once the gathering or meeting is over, there is no other type of socialization and everyone goes back to their respective workplace.

In contrast, unions in China organize social events involving sports, picnics, exercises, outings, charity, and silent auctions to support the least fortunate members of the union or local community. Most of these events are associated

with health and general well-being of employees, but some are communicated as protection of the environment for peoples' safety and health. For instance, in activities organized by the union, members often go outside of the city for hiking and are encouraged to bring a bag to collect garbage. Union members at the grassroots level engaging in such activities observe that union leaders and even some firms' managers are collecting garbage next to them, hiking with them, or helping the poor members of the community. These activities, which are offered by the union and not by the party, are opportunities to internalize and apply pro-social and pro-environmental ideas and practices (Bandura, 1974; Winterich *et al.*, 2013).

These two differences between reasons for joining their respective institutions and the socialization of norms have implications for the extent to which members of the Party and members of unions may have dissimilar responses to behaviours related to the environment. While both institutions may increase awareness and the intended willingness to sacrifice to improve the environment, the impact on the actual behaviours taken to improve the environment may differ. In the case of the Party, the message is symbolically transmitted by "willingness to sacrifice" and not necessarily doing anything to remedy it, while in the case of the union, the message is internalized with subsequent action (Winterich *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, union members are more likely to convert their intentions into actions that would improve the environment. As such we propose:

**HYPOTHESIS 3:** Members of ACFTU are more likely than members of CPC to act in an environmentally friendly way.

## Methodology

### Data

We acquired the data from the *Chinese General Social Survey* (CGSS), collected by the Data Center at the Renmin University of China. The CGSS is a nationally representative dataset and as such provides a representative description of the Chinese population across the country, providing results that are high in external validity. The CGSS is China's first national, comprehensive, continuous (repeated cross-sectional) nationally representative social survey.

Data were collected for the surveys starting in 2003 and have been collected annually up to the current year. The survey is a cross-sectional survey which captures information from different households every year. The sample is based upon a representative sample of China's 125 districts, 500 townships and 1000 villages. We utilize the 2010 version of the survey because that was the first time it focused on social sustainability issues related to the environment.

Initially, there were close to 12,000 observations in the full sample. However, the environmental variable questions were only asked of a random sample of respondents (about 3,700) in this survey. After cleaning the dataset and deleting observations with missing information on the key dependent variables, we are left with a sample size of slightly over 3,100 individuals.

## Measurements

### Dependent Variables

Our methodology involves regressions with three groups of dependent variables that capture the aspects of the environmental issues that enable us to make the comparisons between the CPC and the ACFTU that we outlined previously. Those three aspects are: ‘awareness’ of the environmental problem; an intended ‘willingness to pay’ to reduce the problem; and actual ‘actions’ of altering behaviour towards reducing the problem.

The ‘awareness’ measure is based on the following question in the CGSS: “Overall, how aware are you of environmental issues?” The answer is measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with “not aware at all” being equal to one and an upper limit of “very aware” equal to five.

The ‘willingness to pay’ reflects an intention to sacrifice monetarily to improve the environment as measured by a 5-point Likert scale for three separate questions including whether the individual would 1- accept higher prices; 2- pay higher taxes; or 3- accept a lower standard of living in order to protect the environment. Since all three of these items measure the intention of the individual to make a monetary sacrifice for the environment, we combine them into one willingness-to-pay measure ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ) with a high reliability statistic. Results for each individual willingness-to-pay item are similar to the results run separately for the composite measure (available on request).

The behavioural ‘actions’ taken towards improving the environment are measured by responses to three actions: 1- reducing the consumption of oil and gas and other sources of household energy; 2- using less water or re-using water; and 3- not purchasing environmentally unfriendly products. The responses to these questions were measured using a 4-point scale indicating “never, sometimes, often, and always.” Similarly, since all three of these items measure the behaviour of the individual to take concrete environmental actions, we combine them into one environmental action measure ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ) with a high reliability statistic.

Results for each environmental action item are similar to the results run separately for the composite measure (available on request).

## Independent Variables

Our main independent variable of interest is membership in the two key institutions in China. Membership in these two institutions is not mutually exclusive or mandatory, so we created four mutually exclusive binary-coded categories: 1- belong only to the union but not the party; 2- belong only to the CPC but not the union; 3- belong to both the union and the CPC; and 4- belong to neither of these organizations (the reference group).

## Control Variables

We control for variables that may influence 'awareness', 'willingness to pay' and 'actions' towards the environment such as self-employed vs employee, urban *hukou*, household income, gender, marital status, age and education (Chung and Poon, 2001).

## Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations for the key variables of interest are reported in Table 1. Generally, individuals in China reported being 'aware' of environmental issues with a mean score of 3.70 out of a total score of 5. However, the mean fell to about 3.0 out of 5 when asked if they would be 'willing to pay' in terms of higher prices, taxes or a lower standard of living to improve the environment. Finally, the mean score fell to 2.80 for individuals on whether they took concrete 'action' to help the environment (based on multiplying the 2.2 out of 4 by 5/4 to convert to a five-point scale). In essence, there is slippage at each stage going from 'awareness' (3.70) to intended 'willingness to pay' (2.97) to actual 'actions' to improve the environment (2.80 average). Awareness and good intentions do not always translate into desirable actions when confronted with the costs of the actions.

Both union membership and membership in the CPC are positively correlated with environmental 'awareness' and also with 'actions' towards the environment. Importantly, however, the correlation is generally much stronger for union membership compared to membership in the CPC. These basic correlations provide initial evidence that the ACFTU and the CPC affect the 'awareness', 'willingness to pay' and 'actions' of their members, with the correlations for awareness and action being much stronger for unions compared to the CPC.

In order to isolate the independent effect of unions and the CPC on 'awareness', 'willingness to pay' and 'actions' towards the environment, we regress the institutional membership variables on three different environmental variables ('awareness', 'willingness to pay' and 'actions' towards the environment) after controlling for other factors that can affect those measures such as employment, urban *hukou*, household income, gender, marital status, age, and education.

**TABLE 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Table (N = 3,112)**

	Mean	S. D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Environmental Awareness	3.70	0.98	--									
2. Willingness to Pay	2.97	0.99	<b>0.34</b>	--								
3. Environmental Action	2.25	0.78	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.30</b>	--							
4. Union Member	0.17	0.37	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>0.20</b>	--						
5. CPC Member	0.11	0.32	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.08</b>	0.02	<b>-0.16</b>	--					
6. Both Union and CPC	0.08	0.27	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.14</b>	<b>-0.13</b>	<b>-0.11</b>	--				
7. Self-Employed	0.10	0.31	0.02	0.05	0.01	-0.07	-0.03	<b>-0.06</b>	--			
8. Employee	0.32	0.46	<b>0.11</b>	0.02	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.10</b>	<b>-0.23</b>	--		
9. City <i>Hukou</i>	0.53	0.50	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.36</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>0.25</b>	-0.03	<b>0.23</b>	--	
10. Household Income	20438	60829	0.02	0.03	<b>0.05</b>	0.03	<b>0.06</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.13</b>	--

Note: Additional summary statistics for gender, age, marital status and education are also available on request.  
Bold face font indicates  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 2 displays the OLS results for union membership and CPC membership on the environmental variables ('awareness', 'willingness to pay' and 'action'). Column 1 indicates that, after controlling for the various covariates, there is a positive relationship between each of party membership and union membership with 'awareness' of the environment. While these results indicate that the Party and the union each play a role in providing environmental information to their members that conform with the message from the government, the magnitude of the coefficient for union membership is about twice as large as the magnitude of the coefficient for party membership, indicating that union membership has a stronger effect on making their members aware of environmental issues. Being a member of both the union and the party has an effect about the same as being only a member of the union.

The second column of Table 2 indicates the effects of these two institutions on the stated 'willingness' of individuals to make a monetary sacrifice in order to improve the environment through the combination of the three forms: paying higher prices, paying higher taxes, and accepting a lower standard of living. Similar to environmental awareness, there is a positive relationship between each of membership in the union and membership in the Party with the individual's willingness to pay for the environment. However, for these results, the magnitude of the effect is substantially greater for the party membership compared with union membership. Being a member of both the union and the Party has the largest effect.

In column 3 of Table 2, we examine how institutional membership is associated with the 'actions' of individuals towards helping the environment. The results indicate that membership in the union is strongly associated with taking concrete behavioural action to protect the environment. In contrast, being a member of the CPC is not significantly related to taking positive environmental action on the part of the individual. Being a member of both the union and the Party is also positively associated with taking action to preserve the environment. The fact that the magnitude of the positive effect is about the same as union membership and that party membership has no effect suggests that the positive effect of being both a union and party member is driven by the union membership component.

The control variables illustrate some interesting relationships. City *hukou* has a strong positive effect on taking actions to preserve the environment, possibly reflecting their dealing with urban pollution. Males have a greater awareness of environmental issues than do females, but males are no more willing to pay or to take action to improve the environment. There is a strong positive relationship between education and all of the outcomes of awareness, willingness to pay and taking action to improve the environment. But the strength of that relationship dissipates as one moves from awareness to willingness to pay to taking action to improve the environment.

**TABLE 2**  
**Regression of Environmental Variables on Union and CPC Membership**

	(1) Environmental Awareness	(2) Environmental Willingness to Pay	(3) Environmental Action
<i>(Neither union nor CPC)</i>			
Union	0.268*** (0.054)	0.169*** (0.056)	0.244*** (0.042)
CPC	0.136** (0.059)	0.228*** (0.061)	0.059 (0.045)
Both Union and CPC	0.297*** (0.072)	0.295*** (0.075)	0.269*** (0.056)
<b>Controls</b>			
<i>(unemployed)</i>			
Self-employed	0.012 (0.061)	0.122* (0.063)	0.036 (0.047)
Employee	0.059 (0.044)	-0.051 (0.045)	-0.052 (0.034)
City <i>Hukou</i>	0.004 (0.044)	0.001 (0.046)	0.175*** (0.034)
Household Income RMB (100,000s)	-0.047 (0.029)	-0.002 (0.030)	-0.009 (0.022)
Male	0.067* (0.035)	0.028 (0.037)	-0.018 (0.027)
Single	-0.090** (0.046)	-0.011 (0.047)	-0.028 (0.035)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
<i>(no education)</i>			
Primary school	0.281*** (0.060)	0.152** (0.062)	0.105** (0.046)
High School Graduate	0.369*** (0.073)	0.217*** (0.075)	0.187*** (0.056)
Post-Secondary or Higher	0.480*** (0.083)	0.251*** (0.086)	0.206*** (0.064)
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.414*** (0.116)	2.733*** (0.119)	2.326*** (0.089)
Observations	3 112	3 112	3 112
R-squared	0.086	0.061	0.151

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$



## Discussion

We compared the effects on environmental issues of membership in two major institutions in China—unions and the CPC—both of which are intricately linked to one another and to the government, and both are major institutions in the development and formation of human resource policies within the firm. The environmental issues involved three components: ‘awareness’ of environmental issues, ‘willingness to pay’ to improve the environment and ‘actions’ taken to improve the environment.

Our results yield the following generalizations that confirm our hypothesis. First, both unions and the Party have a positive and generally significant effect on improving ‘awareness’, exacting a ‘willingness to pay’ to improve the environment and taking ‘actions’ to improve the environment (although for CPC membership, the latter is statistically insignificant). This highlights that the government message on the need to improve the environment is transmitted through both of these institutions, central to human resources in the firm (Cooke, 2008). Second, the effect of the union is much stronger than that of the CPC in increasing ‘awareness’ and especially in taking ‘actions’ to improve the environment. In fact, party membership is not associated with ‘taking positive action’, in spite of its positive effect on ‘awareness’ and lip service through an increased stated ‘willingness to pay’ to improve the environment. This suggests that, indeed, the union is a stronger “transmission belt” for conveying and carrying out the message of the government. Third, membership in both the union and the CPC has positive effects on all three measures: ‘awareness’, ‘willingness to pay’, and ‘taking action’.

A limitation of our study is that we cannot prove the causal impact, as opposed to associations, of the CPC or the ACFTU on the environmental outcomes. These results, however, are consistent with expectations based on the functions and incentive structures within each institution. Members of the Party are likely to be aware of the party message on the environment as it is increasingly repeated by the government and set at higher ranks by the Party itself. Party members are likely to focus on furthering their careers and, as such, only mimic the attitudes of the Party and government without the openness to further internalize and carry out environmental action. This symbolization of norms of the Party does not turn into action to be behaving in an environmentally friendly way (Winterich *et al.*, 2013). Actions are generally private and not observed by the Party so there is an incentive to pay lip service to environmental issues but not to carry through costly actions. Individuals who are members of the party are more likely to emphasize the importance of the environment due to a desire to appear aligned with the governmental message; however, in actuality, these members are engaging in green washing as party members are not more likely to take action to protect the environment compared to ACFTU members or to the public in general.

In contrast, the institutional effect of union membership is significant in all dimensions of awareness, willingness to pay and taking action. This is consistent with the personal impact in participating in activities organized by the union that are related to social activities and to employee health and the environment discussed previously. Members, free of any constraint, participate voluntarily and during their participation in activities interact and internalize, and subsequently operationalize, pro-environmental action. The internalization and application of socially-oriented actions (Winterich *et al.*, 2013) on the part of unions in other areas has helped translate awareness into action in this area of growing importance in China.

### Implications for HRM

Unions in China have been criticized as simply being token institutions for conveying the wishes of the government in seeking harmony with employers rather than protecting the interests of workers. This may well be true and we do not intend to challenge or change this perception of unions in China. However, this paper is an initial effort to emphasize the unions' potential positive contribution in improving the environment from within the human resources management institutions in China and other Party-state economies. Our results suggest that unions are successful in, not only making their members aware of environmental issues, but also in translating that 'awareness' into 'action'. Whether this would translate into broader actions, such as fighting corruption and acting upon other areas of environmental and social responsibility, is an interesting and open question. These findings further help us to better understand the union's function in the dynamic and changing environment of China (Cooke, 2008) at a time when the function of the union in the unique context of China is being questioned (Taylor and Li, 2007).

Another important implication of this study is the impact of different institutions central to the human resource department on larger social issues—a context unique to China. We provide one of the first studies to examine the different impacts of the CPC and the union on its member's attitudes and behaviours. As pointed out by (Cooke, 2008: 306) through the examination of specific enterprises in China, "enterprise culture initiatives in some organizations may not have reached the hearts of employees". This study examines this issue more deeply by showing that, while the impact of the Party on the environment only extends to attitudes, the impact of unions, through their actual practices and interactions with its members, is helpful in promoting pro-environmental behaviour. Through the examination of differences in impacts of the union and Party, our study speaks to a broader issue of importance in the different ways that these institutions act to affect HR behaviour.

This implication also could be extended not only to other Party-state economies, where most HR institutions fall under one or similar line of command, but also to market economy institutions as well. Human resource institutions are embedded within political parties and their agendas may not bring the real strategic changes that enterprises wish to achieve. By separating unions from political parties and their agendas, unions may be better equipped to direct employees to take action toward directions that are more important to people and society.

Our study confirms that behaviour does not automatically follow from a positive attitude towards protecting the environment (Ajzen, 1991) and that it is important to separate and decouple environmental attitudes and behaviours (e.g. Crilly, Zollo and Hansen, 2012; Delmas and Montes-Sancho, 2010). It is easy and much less costly for individuals in China to participate in green washing, especially when the message is conveyed by the government. It is much harder to transfer this knowledge or attitude into actual action. Unions in China, however, are much more effective than the CPC in transferring 'awareness' and attitudes into 'action'.

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## SUMMARY

### Union and Communist Party Influences on the Environment in China

We examine the ways in which two major and related governmental institutions of China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and government controlled All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), exert different effects on the attitudes and behaviour of people toward the environment. Our motivation is to see which institution is more effective in making individuals 'aware' of environmental issues, expressing a 'willingness to pay' to alleviate the problems, and ultimately to 'act' on the issue by altering their behaviour.

Based on theories of planned behaviour and social learning, we hypothesize that membership in the CPC as well as in the ACFTU fosters an 'awareness' of environmental problems and a 'willingness to make a sacrifice' to protect the environment, but that members of the ACFTU are more likely than members of the CPC to act on the issue by altering their behaviour.

We test our hypothesis based on a nationally representative sample ( $n=3112$ ) from the *2010 Chinese General Social Survey* (CGSS). Our results indicate that both the Party and the union have positive effects on 'awareness' and 'willingness to pay', but the union effect is generally stronger and only it (and not the Party) affects individual behaviour toward protecting the environment.

Unions in China are generally regarded as having little or no independent power to organize workers and engage in free collective bargaining. Their role is to foster harmony between workers and employers and to co-opt grassroots actions, wildcat strikes and the growth of independent unions, all in the interest of fostering stability and growth. While this is undoubtedly the case, our results are consistent with an emerging view of a more variegated picture of Chinese trade unions that highlights some more positive elements, in our case, fostering 'actions' to improve the environment in China.

KEYWORDS: China, environment, institutions, unions, Communist Party of China, attitudes, behaviour.

## RÉSUMÉ

### L'influence des syndicats et du parti communiste sur l'environnement en Chine

Dans cet article, nous examinons comment le Parti communiste chinois (PCC) et la Fédération nationale des syndicats de Chine (FNSC), deux grandes institutions gouvernementales apparentées, exercent de multiples influences sur les attitudes et les comportements des individus envers l'environnement. Notre objectif est de cerner quelle institution parvient le mieux à rendre les individus davantage conscients des problèmes environnementaux, à susciter chez eux la volonté de



défrayer les coûts liés à leur atténuation, et enfin, à les pousser à passer à l'action en modifiant leur comportement.

En nous appuyant sur les théories du comportement planifié et de l'apprentissage social, nous émettons les hypothèses que l'appartenance au PCC ou à la FNSC favorise la conscientisation environnementale et la disposition à faire des sacrifices pour protéger l'environnement, mais que les membres de la FNSC auront davantage tendance à passer à l'action sur les questions environnementales en modifiant leur comportement.

Nous testons nos hypothèses sur base d'un échantillon de niveau national ( $n=3112$ ) tiré du *Chinese General Social Survey* (CGSS) de 2010. Nos résultats indiquent que le PCC et la FNSC influencent tous deux positivement la conscientisation des individus et leur volonté de contribuer à la protection de l'environnement. Les effets de la FNSC sont, cependant, généralement plus marqués et elle seule influence leur comportement concernant la protection de l'environnement.

Les syndicats en Chine sont généralement vus comme ayant peu ou pas d'indépendance dans le cadre de la syndicalisation des travailleurs et de la négociation collective. Leur rôle consiste plutôt à favoriser une relation harmonieuse entre employés et employeurs, à contrer les actions de terrain, les grèves sauvages et la croissance des syndicats indépendants, cela dans l'objectif d'assurer la stabilité et la croissance économique. Bien que ce soit indéniablement le cas, les résultats de notre étude concordent avec une nouvelle conception plus nuancée du syndicalisme chinois qui souligne également des éléments positifs, en l'occurrence, l'encouragement à poser des actions afin d'améliorer l'environnement en Chine.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** Chine, environnement, institutions, syndicats, Parti communiste chinois, attitudes, comportements.

## RESUMEN

### La influencia de los sindicatos y del Partido Comunista en el medio ambiente en China

Examinamos las formas en que dos importantes instituciones gubernamentales de China, vinculadas entre sí, el Partido Comunista Chino (PCC) y la Federación nacional de sindicatos de China (FNSC) controlada por el gobierno, ejercen múltiples influencias en las actitudes y el comportamiento de las personas respecto al medio ambiente. Nuestra motivación es distinguir qué institución es más eficaz para «concientizar» a las personas sobre las cuestiones ambientales, incentivar su voluntad de contribuir a aliviar los problemas y, en última instancia, pasar a la acción mediante un cambio de comportamiento.

Basándose en teorías del comportamiento planificado y del aprendizaje social, suponemos que la pertenencia al PCC y a la FNSC fomenta la conciencia de los problemas ambientales y la voluntad de sacrificarse para proteger el medio

ambiente, pero que los miembros de la FNSCh tienen más probabilidades que los miembros del PCCh de actuar sobre la cuestión modificando su comportamiento.

Ponemos a prueba nuestra hipótesis sobre la base de una muestra representativa a nivel nacional ( $n=3112$ ) de la *Encuesta Social General de China* (ESGCh). Nuestros resultados indican que tanto el Partido como el sindicato tienen efectos positivos en la conciencia y la voluntad de contribuir, pero el efecto sindical es generalmente más fuerte y sólo él (y no el Partido) influye en el comportamiento individual con respecto a la protección del medio ambiente.

En general se considera que los sindicatos en China tienen poco o ningún poder independiente para organizar a los trabajadores y participar en la negociación colectiva libre. Su papel es fomentar la armonía entre trabajadores y empleadores y evitar las acciones populares, las huelgas salvajes y el crecimiento de sindicatos independientes, todo en el interés de fomentar la estabilidad y el desarrollo. Si bien este es sin duda el caso, nuestros resultados son consistentes con una visión emergente de una imagen más variada de los sindicatos chinos que resalta algunos elementos más positivos, en nuestro caso, fomentando acciones para mejorar el medio ambiente en China.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** China, medio ambiente, instituciones, sindicatos, Partido Comunista de China, actitudes, comportamiento.