Between Riots and Protests: A hybrid approach to environmental contention in China

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by

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The last decade has witnessed a series of massive environmental contention in China. Thousands of people took to the street to protest against potential pollution risks associated with various industrial and infrastructure projects. Scholars have approached these recent social uprisings with insights and analytical tools mostly from literature on social movements within the western democratic context. However, these perspectives fail to capture the full complexity of the environmental contention in China. Several paradoxes found in recent environment contention episodes have made it difficult to categorize them into either riots or acts of protest. On one hand, like most riots, they appeared to be spontaneous, disorganized and emotion-driven with an absence of an explicit organizer and an observable mobilization process. On the other hand, they were far more than a pure expression of frustration as the participants have delivered recognizable demands to the government while employing a repertoire ranging from peaceful demonstration to violent confrontation. Taking the urban anti-PX protests as examples, this article addresses the unique nature of environmental contention in China. It proposes a new approach which looks beyond the literature of social movements and brings attention to riot theories, arguing that these episodes of environmental contention are a “hybrid” of riots and protests whose cumulative influence on one another transforms them into dynamic processes.

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All are welcome!