

A Conflict in Environmental Cultures: Tea-serving Volunteers and Conservationists in Taiwan*

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Abstract

The past studies on Taiwan's environmentalism tend to focus on the practice and discourse on the part of the conscious minority of activists, who are often well-educated and take the mainstream ecology as their guiding principle, and hence neglect the question how the grassroots people respond to the rise of environmentalism in their own way. This paper analyzes an on-going conservation controversy in Chaishan (柴山), a popular hiking area in Kaohsiung City. The dispute arises because many mountain climbers volunteer to prepare and serve tea in scenic spots, which is not only illegal but also causes ecological damage. I will argue that these volunteers actually practice *bricolage* in which the traditional charity and life-nourishing cultures are creatively mixed with western environmentalism, whereas, the conservationists subscribe to the philosophy of deep ecology, noted for its critique of anthropocentrism. I will analyze this conflict to show the unevenness of cultural globalization in which the imported elements are learned and interpreted in a local context.

Introduction

For many persons, environmentalism, or the conscious attempt to restructure social institutions to meet the ecological crises, is almost synonymous with globalization, which basically refers to the exponential growth of transnational exchange in commodity, money, persons and ideas. Environmental activists everywhere in the world claim to “think globally and act locally”, as if they constituted a close-knitted and homogenous group of vanguards. The “globalness” of environmentalism implies the profound similarity in different localities of the world so that human beings as a whole are facing the same challenge.

Such simple interpretation of environmentalism is intuitively understandable since it seems to resonate with our everyday experience. Environmental hazards do not recognize national boundaries and their negative impacts are often international in scope. The discovery of acid rain is a clear example. How the coal-burning English industrialization damaged the Scandinavian forest (Hannigan 1995: 136-137) demonstrates the intricate interconnectedness of different societies, which are embedded in a single ecosystem. More recently, loss of biodiversity, climate change and radioactivity contamination are universally perceived as “global issues.” Furthermore, environmentalists have been the pioneer practitioners in the globalization discourse (Yearly 2007), as evidenced by the “Earth Day” and the “Earth Summit”. In the international arena, environmentalists are among the earliest participants who sought to promote social change without exclusively relying upon the power of nation state, and hence helped to create a “world civic politics” (Wapner 1995).

Arguably, Ulrich Beck’s essays best exemplifies this environmentalism-as-globalization outlook. The advent of what he calls “world risk society” necessitates that “a shared space of responsibility and agency bridging all national frontiers and divides is created” (Beck 2006: 23). He maintains that our age should be more precisely characterized as “cosmopolitanization”, or a more advanced, complicated form of globalization. A typical “cosmopolitan consciousness” includes the awareness of crisis in world society so that mankind constitutes a “civilizational community of fate.” Perhaps, the worldwide sympathy for Japanese people and resurgence of anti-nuclear movement following the wake of Fukushima disaster in March 2011 constitutes an instance of cosmopolitan consciousness in the era of world risk society.

In the field of environmental sociology, there are attempts to theorize the global origin of the contemporary environmentalism. World environmental regime theorists argue that the growth of modern environmentalism is a product of western modernity that gradually transforms the perception of Nature from the resources for mankind to

an interdependent ecosystem. International scientists constitute an “epistemic community” that helps to disseminate the latest discoveries and to institute contemporary environmental regulations, such as national park and environmental impact assessment. In particular, these theorists argue against the traditional “bottom-up” explanation of growing environmental consciousness as a product of mobilization and activism (Frank et al. 2000a, 2000b; Schofer and Hironaka 2005). For them, the world environmental regime works in a “top-down” manner so that each nation state is now obliged to protect its own natural environment.

The ecological modernization theory predicts industrial societies will further evolve into a more technically sophisticated form of modernity by taking into account the negative side-effects of development. An ecologically modernized society is characterized by the heightened awareness of environmental degradation as well as the conscious efforts on the part of scientists, politicians and business leaders to solve the issues of pollution and resource depletion (Mol et al. 2009).

These two theories concur in their claim to view the world’s environmental problems as fundamentally the same. This assumption implies the western form of environmentalism shows the future image of the other areas of the world. Such worldwide universalism is challenged by other theorists who focus on the trajectory of the Global South. Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) argue that environmentalism come in chiefly two varieties. The richer countries produce the so-called “wilderness crusades” whose effort in protecting pristine nature from destruction come from their more affluent lifestyle and altruism, whereas the “struggle for livelihood” is the more commonly seen in the developing countries where the poor people encounter the threat of expropriation. Guha (1989), in particular, powerfully argues against the feminist and spiritualist (mis-)interpretations of the Indian Chipko movement in which Himalayan peasants hugged their village trees to resist the encroachment of logging company. The Chipko movement is fundamentally a continuation of traditional peasant resistance which aims at nothing more than their own survival.

Rather than global uniformity, Martinez-Alier (2004) maintains a highly unequal ecological distribution in terms of resource depletion and pollution currently exists between affluent and impoverished countries. From the perspective of the Global South, researchers point out the environmental plight of the developing countries do not come from the lack of economic opportunities, but from the danger of capitalistic enclosure that threatens to expropriate the common land from the poor people (The Ecologist 1992). It follows there is no “common future” as the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development grandiosely proclaimed in 1987. The false universalism is flawed in disguising the highly diversified nature of environmental problems.

In this paper, I follow the latter perspective in its critique of simple identification of environmentalism with globalization. But rather from a political-economy perspective that looks at the distribution of resources and hazard, I will focus on the cultural dimension of environmentalism and analyze how western-imported ideas are reprocessed and hybridized with local traditions.

An in-depth case study on the conservation controversy in Chaishan (Firewood Mountain; 柴山) in Kaohsiung City is used to identify two types of actors involved in this dispute. Conservationists adopt a biocentric perspective that treats the nature as inherently valuable and aim to protect Chaishan from human encroachment. Conservationists are largely middle-class professionals who organized a social movement organization in 1992, and their tireless advocacy led to establishment of the Chaishan Nature Park in 1997 as well as its upgrading to National Nature Park in 2011. On the other hand, tea-serving volunteers (奉茶志工) evolved from regular mountain climbers who began to carry water, cooking gas and other boiling instruments to prepare freshly brewed tea for other fellow climbers. Currently tea-serving volunteers are concentrated in three locations in Chaishan, and they take shift in carrying and brewing to make sure that most of the daytime climbers can enjoy warm tea in the mountain. Tea-serving volunteers, needless to say, are anthropocentric in seeing Chaishan as a natural gym as well as an outdoor recreation area. Hence their activities in forest clearing and stockpiling tea-brewing utensils draw the criticism from conservationists, therefore giving rise to the mutual hostility for more than a decade.

For this research, I conducted two in-depth interviews with conservation activists and fifteen ones with tea-serving volunteers in 2009-2010. In 2009-2011, I also went mountain-hiking in Chaishan and produced thirty-one entries of field note. Documentary data came from journalistic sources and internet.

Before entering the case of Chaishan, the following section will discuss the global and local dimensions of Taiwan's environmentalism.

Taiwan's Environmentalism in Global and Local Perspectives

In his *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*, Robert Weller (2006) presents an excellent analysis on the cultural dimension of Taiwan's environmentalism. Basically he argues Taiwanese "discovered nature" with the advent of environmental movement in the mid-1980s. Prior to that, the idea of Nature as an objective entity that confronted mankind was foreign to the native culture which did not subscribe to the western notion of culture-nature dualism. Taiwan's fateful encounter with nature was made possible because of the acute ecological crises following the rapid postwar industrialization, but also due to the

import of the dominant environment discourses from the United Nations and the United States. However, Weller rejects the oversimplified picture of Taiwan's environmentalism as a characterless clone of global practice by pointing out the persistence of indigenous cultures and the heterogeneous, if not mutually-conflicting, international sources. Hence, Taiwanese variant of environmentalism constitutes a cross-bred species, or an "alternative civility" (Weller 1999) that lies somewhere between local tradition and western modernity. Here I mainly agree with Weller's diagnosis and seek to apply his observation to the conservation movement.

True, Taiwan's earliest environmental activists were largely enlightened because of their overseas education. Take the anti-nuclear scholars who ignited the first round nuclear debate in the early 1980s for example, these US-trained scientists were converted into the anti-nuclear camp due to the 1979 Three Mile Island incident. Once back in Taiwan, they simply applied the contemporary American anti-nuclear discourses in the local context (Ho 2003: 689-690). While the scientists' language was rational and universalistic, grassroots anti-pollution protests were noted for their passion and violence. In the earlier period, pollution victims' activism was little organized and hence they often erupted into barricades against industrial producers. As many observers noted, grassroots environmentalism often proceeded with elements from folk religion. Pollution was perceived as a threat to the wellbeing of local communities, and patron deities were evoked to protect their believers (Lu 2009, Ho 2005, Reardon-Anderson 1992).

In other words, while Taiwan's environmentalism was a joint product of middle-class professionals and victimized grassroots, they essentially operated in the different "universe of meanings", to borrow a term from social phenomenology. Westernized environmental activists tended to think their action as contemporaneous with the global trend, and their outlook was cosmopolitan in identifying their effort as part of the worldwide trend to save the planet. However, grassroots activists were dyed-in-the-wool localites whose environmental attention rarely extended beyond the spatial boundary of their communities.

Consequently, these two streams of activism sometimes joined hands in the common effort to fight pollution, and at times were at loggerheads. As observed by Weller (2006: 115), "in contrast to the hopes of the universalistic and biocentric NGO elites, all of these local forms of organization work to serve only their particular locality with a primary emphasis on human welfare". This conflict was particularly acute when it came to the issue of monetary compensation for pollution. From the perspective of middle-class professionals, demanding material benefits on the ground of pollution victimhood was no less than a shameful act of "environmental betrayal". The only legitimate claim should be a firm rejection of any forms of pollution.

Nevertheless, grassroots people were of the opinion that the compensation was but the second best option they had to accept. After all it was they who suffered from environmental degradation and paid their personal cost in terms of health, livelihood and property value. In particular, they resented the self-righteousness on the part of professional environmentalists who seemed to condescend to teach how to love their homeland. The difference in cultural orientations explained the well-noted conflict during the 1988 Linyuan Incident, in which local people followed their politicians' lead to demand monetary compensation and shunned the well-intended intervention from the NGO leaders (Ho 2010).

In the area of resisting industrial pollution, the global and the local engage in a sometimes-cooperative-and-sometimes-conflicting pattern. In other issues of environmental protection, local cultural traditions appear quite adaptive in helping to popularize some pro-environment practices. Women in Chinese culture are expected to play the role of "nurturing mothers" (Weller 1999: 111-121), and hence, the women-led Homemakers' Union developed an alternative style of environmental activism that focused more on consumption and education issues. The Homemakers' Union was the pathfinder in organic food cooperative movement that sought to promote environment-friendly agriculture as well as health-conscious consumption. Their food coops now comprised more than thirty thousand households—the biggest non-for-profit distribution chain in Taiwan (Chang 2009).

Furthermore, resource recycling is an area where government's effort has persistently fell short of expectation. To make up for this deficit, Taiwan's large-scale Buddhist organizations initiated the lead to mobilize their followers for the voluntary acts of collecting, classifying and reusing the household waste. Buddhist organizations produced a modernized interpretation of the traditional teachings of "cherishing one's blessings" (惜福) and "merits-based-upon-one's contribution" (功德) and redirected believers' commitment to resource recycling. According to Madsen (2007), this was part of the efforts by religious leaders to meet the challenges of Taiwan's modern society. Evidently, the recycling campaign sponsored by Buddhist organizations were so successful that a report showed that a significant number of people identified Tzu Chi (慈濟) as the environmental organization, while only a few could mention the more established, movement-oriented ones as example (Chen 2008: 144).

In short, the existing studies do not support the naïve claim that Taiwan's environmentalism constituted a transplanted variant from the global society; neither does it substantiate the expectation that local tradition will eventually give way to a certain form of western modernity as the environmental issues emerge as a pivotal concern. What we have seen in industrial pollution, organic food and resource

recycling are a fascinating and lively cross-fertilization among different cultures. It remains to be seen how this inter-cultural dialogue proceeds in the realm of urban conservation.

Conservationists: The Movement to Conserve Chaishan¹

Chaishan, which now refers to a hilly area squeezed between a navy port in the north and a commercial harbor in the south. Located right in the heart of Kaohsiung City, it was formally called Takao Hill (打狗山) and then Longevity Mountain (壽山). Due to its strategic location, Chaishan had been placed under military control since the mid-1930s by the Japanese colonial government. The postwar KMT government continued to maintain the entry restriction and banned economic activities until late-1980s when Taiwan began to undergo democratizing process. The protracted military presence brought about an unexpected result in that Chaishan was largely well preserved in terms of ecological resources.

Like other Kaohsiung residents, a group of journalists, writers, medical doctors, lawyers, and architects came to know Chaishan with the gradual relaxation of military control in the late 1980s. At first they were simply a group of friends who enjoyed exploring the uncharted mountainous area of Chaishan on holidays. Mesmerized by its pristine beauty, they were convinced of the need to do something more than trekking. They held a photography exhibition in a local gallery to disseminate their message to the general public. Then they organized the Chaishan Nature Park Promotion Society (CNPPS; 柴山自然公園促進會) in 1992.

The ideal of a nature park came after their vacation in Tokyo, where a bird sanctuary was well preserved in the densely inhabited old town of Ueno. The peaceful coexistence of metropolis and nature became their number one objective, which meant a concerted effort to protect Chaishan from careless mountain-climbers and greedy realty developers. For them, Kaohsiung had been an unsightly industrial city, long overdue for an injection of humanistic and spiritual culture. Living with nature was wholesome as well as remedial. Chaishan was seen as the last-resort redemption to the over-urbanized residents. To promote this goal, their professional capacities and financial assets were valuable resources. The CNPPS wrote and published a graphic brochure to make public the natural beauty of Chaishan and the urgent need of conservation.

The CNPPS was never short of literary talents so that they could always easily translate their demands in highly accessible language. At that time, some CNPPS members were working for locally-based media, and consequently, they could effortlessly transmit their messages to a wider reach. Soon the CNPPS became the

¹ The following paragraphs in this section uses and rearranges materials from Ho (2008).

most authoritative source of news regarding Chaishan. In the mid-1990s, the CNPPS also began a program of environmental education by training volunteers to become “ecology interpreter (生態解說員)”, who could serve as the guides to tourists. This program helped the CNPPS to recruit more members beyond the narrow circle of founding professionals. Among the new recruits, schoolteachers predominated in numbers and they were also vital in further relaying the gospel of conservation to their students.

At first, city officials were skeptical of the ideal of a nature park, which they claimed did not constitute a legal term like “national park” or “urban park”. Frustrated conservationists suspected the hidden collusion between politicians and land speculators. In 1997, the CNPPS’s campaign bore fruit as the Kaohsiung City Government finally declared the establishment of Chaishan Nature Park. All landed area above over ten meters above the sea level was included. The area encompassed around 1,200 hectares, with more than five-sixths of land still supervised by the military authority. The CNPPS’s idea of zoning was adopted and written into law (Kaohsiung City Government 2003).

With the establishment of Chaishan Nature Park in 1997, the conservationists accomplished the first phase of their mission, and now they had to transform from advocates to educators. The early leadership of CNPPS envisioned a movement strategy of political independence by not officially registering the organization and not applying for the government’s grant. Later on, newer leadership decided to change this course. Their organization was formally registered in 2001, and the new name was Takao Hill Association (THA, 柴山會). In the same year, the THA also started to host the annually educational activity Chaishan Festival (柴山祭). The Chaishan Festival celebrated the ecological bountifulness and was primarily aimed at schoolchildren and their parents. City government subsidy was a critical resource to make this event possible. In 2010, the cooperation between the THA and the public sector further evolved in that a new ecological education center was established by the city government and then subcontracted to the THA for its daily operation.

In a sense, the gradual transformation of conservation activists from an independent advocate to a policy collaborator reflected the growing influence of Taiwan’s vibrant civil society (Fell 2012: 171-191; Hsiao and Ho 2010). However, this is far from suggesting that the partnership between conservationists and officials were friction-free. On the contrary, the THA activists continued to complain that the city government only paid minimal attention to the Chaishan Nature Park. The government did not hire enough inspectors to protect the vast area; as a result, illegal acts of enclosure, cultivating, animal-feeding, and vandalizing by mountain climbers and nearby residents continued as usual. Even more, the prevalent phenomenon of

land occupation and its commercial use by powerful temples, businesspersons and politicians were still connived at by the officials. Frustrated by the lukewarm and underfunded conservation efforts by the city government, the THA activists were convinced that only the higher level official intervention could help to ward off the further ecological damages. That was the reason why they favored the idea of upgrading the management to the central government. With the THA's support, the National Chaishan Nature Park(壽山國家自然公園) was finally established in December 2011.

Volunteers: Tea-Serving for Everyone

In many ways, the CNPPS/THA activists neatly fit in the model of “wilderness crusades”. Upper middle class participation, post-materialistic values and altruistic protection of pristine nature are their conspicuous characteristics. Tea-serving volunteers, on the other hand, have a different social profile. Eleven out of the fifteen interviewed volunteers are willing to reveal their occupation. Among them, there are one civil servant, one medical doctor, and three construction workers, and six businesspersons (managers and shopkeepers). My estimate is that volunteers are generally of lower-middle class and the liberal professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and journalists who make up the bulk of the CNPPS/THA leadership are underrepresented here.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable gender difference. Among conservationists, there is more equal sex distribution and women form the core leadership. For example, a Germany-educated woman has been the THA general secretary since 2001. Tea-serving volunteers are mostly male, and so are all my fifteen interviewees. Occasionally I see few female volunteers working with tea-brewing, but I never encounter a woman carrying a twenty-kilogram water container uphill. Understandably, physical stamina is a great challenge for women. Volunteers are mostly middle-aged, 40s to 50s years old.

Currently there are three tea-serving places in the Chaishan area. They are Seven Ivies(七蔓), Twisted Banyan Trees(盤榕), and Exquisite Booth(雅座). Each place has its own team of volunteers, who take shift in transporting water, tea ingredients, cooking gas, and other equipments as well as boiling and brewing. Seven Ivies is located along an abandoned mining road, and hence can be serviced by motorized vehicles. Twisted Banyan Trees and Exquisite Booth are closer to the mountain peak and require a strenuous one-hour walk in carrying heavy supplies. Three teams of volunteers are in a subtle competition in that they all want to attract most mountain climbers to have their tea; though they sometimes will help one another out. The team at Twisted Banyan Trees is the biggest, amounting to one hundred volunteer. With

such size, they host a year-end banquet (尾牙) annually to celebrate their hard-working. The Exquisite Booth team appears to be the most organized because they attach their own identity stickers in their water containers. In addition, since there exists a pavilion in Exquisite Booth but not in Twisted Banyan Trees, they are able to decorate their home base with all kinds of posters and couplets to make it a “home away from home.” The Seven Ivies team appears mediocre in numbers and solidarity, probably because its traffic availability makes it less attractive for volunteers. They are troubled by the chronic problem of shortage in manpower and a notice to recruit new volunteers has been posted since December 2009.²

Chaishan visitors will find it tempting to drink tea in all three places because they offer different concoctions and flavors. The Exquisite Booth volunteers present a particular blend with cassia (決明子), pacific ginseng (洋蔘), barley (大麥), brown rice (糙米) and coix seed (薏仁). The ingredients in Seven Ivies are similar except that the volunteers there insisted their materials are cooked in advance; hence it tastes blander. In Twisted Banyan Trees, there are rotating choices among plum green tea(梅子綠茶), ginger tea(薑母茶), roselle tea(洛神花茶) and barley tea (麥茶). Most of time tea is served warm, and that means volunteers have to keep brewing batch after batch. In fair-weather holidays, a tea-serving station needs three or four volunteers working nonstop in order to make sure warm tea is always available. Traditionally, warm tea is thought to be good for one’s body, and icy drink after sweating exercise, as seen in the Americanized TV commercials, is always frowned upon. Despite the wide variety of teas served in the mountain, they are said to have beneficial effect for health(養生).

As seen in above, the tea ingredients are particularly selected for its nutrition, and therefore, they made up a considerable outlay. Moreover, since tap water in Kaohsiung area is notoriously not suitable for drinking, volunteers take care to use only water filtered by the reverse-osmosis device—a costly method to purify water. All these amounted to a great deal of money. The Twisted Banyan Trees team regularly makes public their financial account. According to it, the first three months in 2010, they spent 67,000 NT Dollars.³ To cover these expenses, they welcome donation, in kind or in cash. One Kaohsiung City Councilman reportedly donates 10,000 NT Dollars every month to Seven Ivies;⁴ another local Legislator contributes disposal paper cups.⁵

Chaishan’s tea-serving has been existed in such organized manner at least since

² Field note, 2009/12/06.

³ Field note, 2010/05/15.

⁴ Interview, 2009/10/17.

⁵ Field note, 2009/08/15.

early 1990s when the military control was gradually abolished.⁶ There are no place elsewhere in Taiwan that comes close to this case, no matter whether in terms of tea variety and quality or the backbreaking efforts to bring everything uphill. As a matter of fact, the city government shot a publicity video clip to highlight the altruistic contribution of these volunteers because they “made the city more lovable” (Kaohsiung City Government Information Bureau 2006). The current Mayor Chen Chu (陳菊) once visited Seven Ivies and was greatly impressed by the volunteers’ effort in “promoting public welfare”. She took a few sips only, and with gratitude commented, “Water-carrying is a hard work, and hence one should not drink too much.”⁷

Political leaders’ positive evaluation is generally in sync with average citizens’ opinions. For regular mountain climbers, volunteers perform many important services beside warm tea. When needed, they rescue those who go astray, help the injured, and give food to the exhausted ones.⁸ As said before, the city government is unable to provide enough manpower to manage Chaishan; hence the volunteers who are always stationed in Seven Ivies, Twisted Banyan Trees and Exquisite Booth become the de facto emergency managers that ill-fated mountain climbers can always count on. There was once a sudden summer thunderstorm that terrorized mountain climbers. In Exquisite Booth, more than twenty people took shelter in the pavilion. At that time, a volunteer stepped forward to lead this scared crowd. He distributed disposal raincoats to those who did not have an umbrella, and shared his snacks with the hungry ones so that “they could regain the strength to proceed with the downhill route.” As the rain gradually calmed down and people began to leave, he reminded everyone to watch over the slippery steps. I saw a mother asked her child to express gratitude to the volunteer who she referred to as “the big brother”.⁹

Generally speaking, volunteers cited two reasons for tea-serving and other activities in Chaishan. First, they saw water-carrying climbing as a great exercise to strengthen their physical prowess since regular uphill hiking was no longer satisfactory for them. A medical doctor became a volunteer because he wanted to build up his body for more challenging climbing activities. At first, he simply poured away water whenever he reached the peak. Other volunteers suggested his effort could be more productive, and afterwards he started to fill his container with purified water and supplied the tea-serving station.¹⁰ Hence he changed from a solo exerciser to a volunteer. For these volunteers, there was a magic healing power in regular water-

⁶ Interview, 2010/02/06.

⁷ Interview, 2009/10/07.

⁸ Interview, 2009/12/21.

⁹ Field note, 2010/07/24.

¹⁰ Interview, 2010/02/05.

carrying exercise. One person claimed it cured his cancer,¹¹ and another recovered from gout.¹²

Secondly, there were volunteers who aimed explicitly for the public good. Warm tea served in the outdoor area not only quenched the thirst of fatigued mountain climbers, but also encouraged more people to walk in to the nature. Volunteers also helped with a series of activities that kept Chaishan accessible for everyone. They picked up trashes, cleaned the weed, and maintained the wooden pathway. Over the years, some volunteers developed a sense of custodianship so that they thought if they did not continue the effort, Chaishan would degenerate into a dangerous and dirty wasteland. A businessperson in Seven Ivies was so worried that one day there might be no younger generation volunteers to take up his work. His wife even complained about his overzealous devotion to tea-serving which had lasted for a decade.¹³

Two Environmental Activisms at Loggerhead

Conservationists and volunteers represented two kinds of bottom-up activisms to approach the environmental issues as Taiwan underwent democratization and urban middle class started to mobilize for collective action in the early 1990s. They embodied the two different orientations of civil society organizations respectively, advocacy and service. Thanks to the promotional efforts on the part of CNPPS/THA activists, Chaishan's ecology was largely preserved from the risk of commercial development in the wake of military control. Now, Chaishan has become a tourist attraction that was thoroughly publicized by the local government—an almost unthinkable development two decades ago when conservationists launched their campaign.

Volunteers, on the other hand, adopted a low-profile form of public involvement that did not aim at changing the status quo. Their goal was to help the needy and to create public welfare. Conservationists are few in number, just like other Taiwan's voluntary associations (Marsh 2003). The THA reported to possess less than 70 due-paying members in 2009,¹⁴ not an anomaly in Taiwan's underdeveloped environmental organizations. Clearly, the volunteers in Twisted Banyan Trees who attended its year-end banquet alone surpass the THA membership. Conservationists possess policy influences and could easily have a face-to-face meeting with political leaders, but yet volunteers are enormously popular among citizens. While one can unquestionably characterize the THA as a social movement organization, volunteers appear closer to a charity group.

¹¹ Interview, 2010/02/06.

¹² Interview, 2010/02/06.

¹³ Interview, 2009/10/17.

¹⁴ Interview, 2009/12/27.

Given their diversified orientations and shared focus on Chaishan, one would expect two activisms to be complementary and mutually supportive. However, the truth was that their relation was distant, cold and occasionally hostile. From the perspective of conservationists, volunteers were propagating a wrong lesson in environmental education. Stockpiling equipments and materials in the mountainous area and outdoors water cooking not only damaged the environment, but also violated the regulation of Nature Park. In addition, mountain climbers should learn that whenever they approach the Nature it was necessary to be self-sufficient and minimize their impacts left behind. However, what the volunteers did was to made mountain climbers dependent and erroneously expect the same civilized enjoyment even though they were far away from the urban area. Even worse, once tea-serving became well-known, more and more mountain climbers would gather at certain places. Hence, volunteers often took effort to clear forest to make more room, and sometimes, they even planted new species to “decorate” their tea-serving station, thus disrupting the already fragile ecology.¹⁵ Twisted Banyan Trees was the only tea-serving place that did not have a pavilion, and hence volunteers had been lobbying the city government to build one for them. Even though volunteers enjoyed the support for a sympathetic City Councilor, the THA managed to have that project overruled by the government officials.¹⁶

In its educational programs, the THA always sought to propagate the correct ways in approaching the Nature. In an event I observed in the 2010 Chaishan Festival, participant schoolchildren and their parents were taught to bring their own water always and try not to drink the served tea in Chaishan.¹⁷ At times, hostile confrontation between conservationists and volunteers took place, as seen in the following episode told by a conservation activist.

“I cannot stand the sight of tea drinkers. I asked them how they disposed of their used tea leaves. Did they simply throw them on the ground? They directed me to a person called A-Chuan who was always in charge of tea brewing. ‘Who do you represent? Which school? Which governmental agent?’ Mr. A-Chuan replied with unfriendliness. I said, ‘I am not a representative of any organization.’ He said, ‘Don’t come to me if you do not stand for any organization, school or governmental agent.’ Patiently I explained that littering tea leaves harmed the environment. Biodegradability did not mean we could throw away as much as we like. There was a limit for the microbes’ capacity to absorb our waste.” (THA Newsletter (2004/12): 14).

It should not be surprising that volunteers perceived conservationists as

¹⁵ Interview, 2009/11/21.

¹⁶ Field note, 2010/10/11.

¹⁷ Field note, 2010/05/22.

self-righteous and arrogant. When interviewed, many volunteers revealed negative comments as follows,

“If they [conservationists] were to file a complaint at the government, officials would not heed them and they would be treated as crazy persons...We are here for the public good, and tea-serving is for the benefit of Kaohsiung citizens”.¹⁸

“What the environmentalists do is but to stage protest. They protest against the concrete pavement; so the city government dare not do it. They have professors and are very powerful”.¹⁹

“There are some left-leaning environmentalists. They sometimes come to us to complain about the danger of fire in the mountain. But there are so few of them, less than one in a hundred”.²⁰

“Environmentalists are not down to earth (紙上談兵). I saw the news that the THA had been downsized to one telephone-answering staff and needed donation badly... There is a value for every existing social group, and none of them is absolutely correct or universally accepted. They want to fly even when they still cannot walk”.²¹

All these comments perceptively identify some vulnerability among the THA activists. Compared with volunteers, they appear socially isolated, financially underfunded, elitist and doctrinaire. Nevertheless, despite the expressed animosity against conservationists, nearly all the interviewed volunteers know that what they do is illegal, technically speaking. Therefore, they often emphasize that their tea-serving is purely spontaneous, not sponsored by an “organization”. Furthermore, when asked about the negative ecological consequence of their activities, volunteers simply deny it and some of them would even argue that they actually work to “protect the environment”.

A closer look at what they actually do reveals that their ideas are oversimplified, shallow, and outright erroneous. For example, they often think not smoking in the public and not using disposal paper cups for tea is synonymous with “environmental protection”. For them, environmental consciousness is often associated with being clean and tidy. Therefore, in order to keep the tea-serving places “clean”, it is acceptable to weed and clean the forest. Some eager volunteers even remove the entire plantation of a certain area and replace it with more manageable and “beautiful” species. And one volunteer justifies these behaviors as follows,

“The Nature will become extinct with its own DNA, and therefore, it needs our reform. These threes are a product of inbreeding, which will be problematic. Although

¹⁸ Interview, 2009/12/21.

¹⁹ Interview, 2009/10/17.

²⁰ Interview, 2010/02/06.

²¹ Interview, 2010/02/06.

our method may not be entirely correct, we certainly perform a great service for the Nature.”²²

Clearly this pseudo-scientific remark only reveals the speakers’ ignorance. Used tea ingredients are another ecological issue that volunteers try to rationalize. Mostly they simply litter it around in the belief they eventually decompose. Volunteers justify their expedient way of disposing of tea ingredients as “what comes from mountain and forest will return to mountain and forest (取之於山林，用之於山林).” Nevertheless, it takes only a causal observation to falsify the claim. Sometimes, used ingredients are so hot that they harm the disposal ground and the soil become barren. Around the tea-serving places, there are always visible heaps of tea leaves that simply do not become part of the nature again.²³

While many volunteers’ practices are evidently ecologically harmful and illegal, the city government still remains curiously inaction. Understandably, volunteers’ enormous popularity makes outright prohibition politically infeasible. Conservationists’ suspicion of the officials’ connivance is in a sense justified. Nevertheless, the city officials have to respond the complaints that some volunteers nearly “privatize” an entire rest stop and their huge water tanks and boilers are an unseemly sight. In early 2011, the government erected a new fence that encircled the volunteers’ working area in Seven Ivies. Since then there was a visual separation between the space for volunteers and that for other mountain climbers, but tea-serving continued as usual.²⁴

Torn between conservationists and volunteers, local public authorities are undoubtedly caught in a horn of dilemma. Tea-serving makes Chaishan famous and popular, but it comes with the negative consequences that one cannot simply ignore. In recent years, Kaohsiung City Government also supported the idea to transfer the Chaishan administration to the central government clearly because it would pass a hot potato to someone else.

Global and Local Environmentalisms

At the bottom of the conflict between conservationists and volunteers, essentially speaking, is a clash between two visions of human-environment relation. The guiding philosophy of CNPPS/THA activists is quite akin to Arne Naess’ influential idea of “deep ecology” with its cogent criticism on anthropocentrism and the emphasis on “biospherical egalitarianism” (Naess 1973), which has inspired many similar attempts in the advanced countries. Conservationists hold it self-evident that all the living things are endowed with their inherent worth, regardless of their utility to human

²² Interview, 2010/02/06.

²³ Field note, 2010/01/10.

²⁴ Field note, 2011/01/26.

needs. As the CNPPS/THA activists insist, the idea for a nature park in Chaishan is to “be based on the Nature” (以自然為主體), whereas the regular urban parks are devoted to human uses (以人為主體).²⁵ There is a natural equilibrium and balance in Chaishan, and hence all the troubles and destructions come from humans’ infringement.²⁶ Conservationists emphasize that we should be humble before Chaishan. In stead of humanizing the nature, it is better to learn to appreciate the intricate natural ecosystem. A true nature lover will certainly practice the art of “thinking like the mountain” (像山一樣思考) because all the desires for domination and greed are artificial and alienation from the real life.²⁷

For conservationists, what the nature offers us is a chance to develop our spirituality that has long been lying dormant in mundane life. Our sensibilities and experiences are enriched through constant contact with nature’s abundances. For this end, we need to put aside our utilitarian concerns and purify our mind for a healthy injection of nature’s blessing. In fact, it is this seedy materialism that brings about ecological disasters in Chaishan. Tea-serving volunteers make the same mistake by bringing the overt urbanized amenities to this sacred place. Therefore, Chaishan should be properly seen as “the dojo for the spirit” (心靈的道場).²⁸

In short, the CNPPS/THA activism largely follows the international trend of mainstream conservationism in its post-materialistic values and nature-centered perspective. Given the core activists’ educational background and more privileged status of professionals, it is not surprising that they easily assimilate the global environmental culture.

While it is difficult to find indigenous cultural elements in conservationists’ discourse, the practice of tea-serving volunteers constitutes an attempt of native culture to assimilate and translate the global message of environmental protection into a local idiom that is more easily understandable and acceptable for common people. Thanks to their tea-serving and other forms of assistance, mountain climbing has become more and more popular among Kaohsiung citizens. There are estimated ten thousand people visiting Chaishan in a single holiday right now.

Even though volunteers are not as articulate as conservationists, their practice implies a different perspective on nature. One of the most conspicuous traits consists in its unabashed anthropocentrism. Kaohsiung citizens are blessed with Chaishan precisely because it offers a precious recreational opportunity. Volunteers find it nonsensical to speak of the inherent value of nature itself. Perhaps this outlook is best exemplified in the couplet posted in Exquisite Booth in summer 2010. It reads as

²⁵ Cited from <http://www.wretch.cc/blog/takaohill/21497375> (2010/02/20).

²⁶ Cited from <http://www.wretch.cc/blog/takaohill/10519293> (2010/02/20).

²⁷ Cited from <http://www.wretch.cc/blog/takaohill/9324819> (2010/02/20).

²⁸ Cited from http://leekc-95kh.blogspot.com/2008/02/blog-post_4211.html (2012/2/2).

follows,

“Strengthening one’s body in Chaishan pathway,
Tasting fragrant tea in Exquisite Booth”
(柴山道上鍊身體，雅座亭內品茶香)²⁹

An eloquent volunteer describes the beneficial effects of water-carrying and tea-serving,

“This mountain has saved many people’s life. If you come here, your life is colorful, otherwise, it will be black-and-white...In climbing mountain, you have to stay focused. So you will not think about those unhappy things. It no longer matters to you, whether it is about your troublesome children or your cash-starved business... That is the reason why the character ‘happy celestials’ (仙) is written with people (人) and mountain (山)” (cited from Li (2008)).

Since many volunteers became healthier with regular exercises, they are in the habit to refer to Chaishan as a “hospital”³⁰—a strongly utilitarian characterization that vividly contrasts with the “spirit dojo” image among conservationists.

Furthermore, there are two indigenous cultural components that volunteers bring into their environmental practice. The first is the “life-nourishing” (養生) culture. As said in above, the particular concoctions served in Seven Ivies and Exquisite Booth are called “life-nourishing tea”. Thus, volunteers approach the nature not in order to appreciate the wonder of the flora and fauna, but for the sake of healthiness. As noted by Tang (2011), Taiwanese still retain the traditional “life-nourishing” body culture, at the same time there embrace the notion of sport and exercise from the West. Here what the volunteers do is nothing less than to naturalize the pre-existing practice by brining the “life-nourishing” culture into the wilderness.

Secondly, the other indigenous culture comes from the traditional idea of do-good charity. Tea-serving is originally an act of compassion toward thirty and weary road travelers, although “tea” in that context is usually a euphemism of drinkable water. Chaishan volunteers apparently reinvented this tradition by giving it a new “environmental” significance. It is no longer a merciful help to those less fortunate vagrants, but an encouragement for city dwellers to go into the mountain. As a rule, volunteers tend not to use the religiously-sounding term of “merit” (功德); nevertheless, they describe their motives as “do-good benevolence” (發善心).³¹

There is a volunteer who comments on the difference between two environmental activisms, “the THA is more academically oriented (偏學術), but we are more indigenous (本土).”³² True, volunteers are deeply rooted in the traditional culture and

²⁹ Field note, 2010/07/25.

³⁰ Interview, 2010/02/06.

³¹ Interview, 2009/11/15.

³² Interview, 2010/02/06.

at the same time they are trying to adapt the modern meanings of environmental protection. As for the THA activists, the impression of being “too academic” undoubtedly has something to do with their deep-seated ideological commitment to the global conservationism, which visibly has only a limited circle of audience in Taiwan.

Conclusion

The enduring controversy over tea-serving in Chaishan over the past two decades can be seen as purely a technical problem that can be neutralized with an institutional solution. Urban conservation requires that both citizens’ need for outdoor recreation and ecological balance be satisfied, especially in densely-populated Taiwanese cities. In the past, the city government might appear indecisive and unprincipled. It tries to accommodate the demands of conservationists and volunteers without pleasing both sides. However, the local politicians’ predicament reflects a real dilemma. A strictly nature-centered Nature Park in a great metropolis, as the CNPPS/THA activists dream of, is simply not feasible. Neither can volunteers continue to expand their service without causing ecological damages. The solution clearly lies in somewhere between the opposing claims of conservationists and volunteers, both of who have to meet in half way eventually.

Nevertheless, this paper aims to present this case in the light of discussion of environmentalism and globalization. Contrary to the naïve claim of some globalization theorists, a hegemonic international culture of modernity does not necessarily give rise to universal uniformity in the sense that locals will imitate what other people in the advanced countries do. The expected process of global leveling and homogenizing simply does not take place. Environmentalism might be characterized as a common effort to address the survival crisis faced by all human beings, but it does not preclude the fact environmentalism comes in all kinds of varieties in different localities. Kaohsiung conservationists are frustrated because their worldview appear culturally uncongenial to most of the citizens. On the contrary, tea-serving volunteers actually pioneers the practice of cultural bricolage by reframing traditional life-nourishing and charity cultures in the age of universal environmental consciousness. Nevertheless, the excessive anthropocentrism makes them oblivious to the environmental damages. It follows that if a robust environmentalism is possible in Taiwan’s context, it has to be simultaneously indigenized and ecologically-oriented.

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