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► **To cite this version:**

Mallory Xinyu Zhan. Lifestyle for social change? Exploring framing and lifestyle politics in the Chinese zero waste movement. *Consumption and Society*, 2024, 3 (1), pp.56-75. 10.1332/27528499Y2023D000000007 . hal-04402731

HAL Id: hal-04402731

<https://hal.science/hal-04402731>

Submitted on 18 Jan 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lifestyle for social change? Exploring framing and lifestyle politics in the Chinese zero waste movement

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The politicisation of everyday life and the proliferation of lifestyle movements have far-reaching consequences on processes of social change. Based on 45 in-depth interviews and virtual ethnography of lifestyle communities, this article reveals how sustainable lifestyle is interpreted and promoted in relation to pro-environmental social change in the ‘zero waste’ movement in urban China. Building on the framing perspective in social movement studies, I use ‘participant frames’ as a heuristic device to uncover bottom-up processes of meaning-making in lifestyle movements. The results reveal that frames constructed by citizen-consumers transitioned from a political and systemic diagnosis to a cultural and communal prognosis, and ultimately centre on a ‘call to action’ that emphasises individual and private actions. The ‘dissonance’ in framing, which involves promoting depoliticised actions while being motivated by political grievances and desires for systemic change, illustrates how citizens navigate structures of opportunities and constraints in China. Through deliberate depoliticisation, lifestyle activism leans towards constructive engagement with institutional actors rather than contentious confrontation and relies on the diffusion of sustainable lifestyle among the general public as the primary tactic for change. By incorporating methodological innovation and presenting new empirical findings from a non-Western context, this article advances the ongoing discussions surrounding political consumption and lifestyle politics.

Key words lifestyle politics • sustainable consumption • social movement • zero waste • China

Key messages

- This article reveals how lifestyle is mobilised as a tool for social change in the Chinese zero waste movement.
- It illustrates how depoliticised actions can be promoted despite shared systemic, political grievances.
- This article advances the ongoing discussions on sustainable consumption and lifestyle politics.

To cite this article: Zhan, M.X. (2024) Lifestyle for social change? Exploring framing and lifestyle politics in the Chinese zero waste movement, *Consumption and Society*, 3(1): 56–75, DOI: 10.1332/27528499Y2023D000000007

Introduction

How we consume, from the way we eat, shop and travel to the way we commute to work and heat our homes, has a profound impact on the environment. Changes in carbon-intensive consumption patterns and lifestyles are therefore indispensable components of climate actions globally. In China, four decades of unprecedented economic growth since the market reform have transformed everyday consumption, leading to a dramatic increase in consumption across various domains. Rising consumption has been critical for meeting fundamental human needs and improving quality of life for the Chinese people. Nevertheless, current per capita trade-adjusted CO₂ emissions in China have reached a level comparable to those of many advanced economies, with the rich contributing a significant share (IEA, 2023). As China continues to grow into an upper-middle-income country, it is critical to reflect upon ways to reduce excessive consumption among its affluent urban populations, towards delivering well-being for all within planetary boundaries. Current research on sustainable consumption and lifestyle in China is dominated by more 'individualistic' approaches built on behavioural change perspectives in the field of economics and psychology (Liu et al, 2016), which tend to focus on educating and nudging individuals into pro-environmental behaviours. Another strand of research turns to policies for regulating unsustainable consumption or incentivising greener alternatives (Shao, 2019). Either way, the active role and agency of citizens and collectives of citizens in driving broader changes from the bottom-up have been systematically downplayed.

It has become increasingly clear that confronting unsustainable consumption requires people to act beyond their capacity as individual consumers, to claim their role as citizens who can work collectively to foster changes in systems of consumption and production (for example, Princen et al, 2002). There is now copious research at the intersection of consumption, lifestyle and activism, encapsulated in concepts like 'lifestyle politics' (de Moor, 2017), 'lifestyle movements' (Haenfler et al, 2012), 'political consumerism' (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013) and 'prefigurative politics' (Yates, 2015). This research attests to the significance of lifestyle and consumption in driving social change while revealing the tensions of citizen engagement in spaces between the state and the market, the collective and the individual, the public and the private (for a review, see Yates, 2022). These tensions become more pronounced under the paradigm of 'authoritarian environmentalism' in China, where citizen participation in environmental decision-making is carefully managed and controlled by the state to preempt and prevent the development of broader political activism challenging the authority of the state (Li and Shapiro, 2020). It is essential to explore whether lifestyle movements emerging in China represent a collective force seeking changes in systems of consumption and production or individualised projects devoid of political ambitions and contestations.

To investigate these questions, this article zooms in on a lifestyle community committed to 'zero waste' (ZW) in urban China. ZW typically involves a series of consumption practices that prioritise waste minimisation. More broadly, it represents an 'anti-consumerist lifestyle' that aims to reduce one's carbon and material footprints, seeking greater simplicity and sustainability in everyday life (Zhan, 2022a). ZW began to emerge in Chinese cities in the 2010s; virtual and physical communities of ZW – bonded through shared interests and practices – began to form. The particular

community that this article focuses on is one of the largest and most active, with over 10,000 members active both online and physically in their respective cities. Drawing from 45 in-depth interviews with active participants in the ZW community and virtual observation, I unveil bottom-up processes of meaning-making by examining how ordinary citizen-consumers 'frame' problems, opportunities and solutions. Following the framing perspective in social movement studies (Snow and Benford, 1988; 1992), I identify the various diagnostic (what is the problem), prognostic (what should be done) and motivational frames (why should we act) articulated by participants and analyse whether and how 'politics' and collective actions are incorporated into these frames. Through this analysis, I also aim to shed light on how citizen-consumers engaged in lifestyle movements navigate the boundaries of activism in their efforts to scale the movement.

In the following section, I commence with a literature review of the various forms of lifestyle politics and their associated frames, followed by a discussion of the opportunities and constraints that shape and condition lifestyle politics in China. Subsequently, I provide details on the analytical framework, the research site and the methods employed. The empirical results are presented, and the frames produced by lifestyle activists in the ZW movement are analysed. Following this, I delve into a discussion of lifestyle activism in China before concluding the article.

Lifestyle politics and the Chinese context

When individuals and communities make conscious choices around their everyday consumption or modes of living out of environmental, political and social concerns, they are said to be engaged in 'lifestyle politics' (Bennett, 1998; Micheletti, 2003; de Moor, 2017). The 'other regarding', pro-public motivations of lifestyle politics set them apart from other lifestyle choices motivated by 'self-regarding' motives, such as desires to prioritise personal health and signal social distinction (Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). Political consumerism is one of the most popular expressions of lifestyle politics: it mainly involves deliberate consumption or avoidance of products, goods or services, known as 'buycott' and boycott (Micheletti, 2003). Through political consumerism, individuals address market actors directly; on aggregate, they form a force that could pressure companies into pro-environmental changes (Micheletti, 2003; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013). Political consumers could also be part of a sustainable 'lifestyle movement' (Haenfler et al, 2012), whereby the active promotion of a lifestyle is used as the primary tool to foster social change. Corresponding with this vision are potentially frames that place the blame on individual consumption and lifestyle (diagnostics) and solutions that target consumption habits (prognostics), appealing to consumer responsibility (motivational frames).

This individualised form of lifestyle politics has been convincingly criticised for its obliviousness to established powers and its inability to address systemic issues (Maniates, 2001; 2019; Kenis and Lievens, 2014). In the meantime, studies shed light on the complexities of lifestyle politics on the ground, in which different modes of engagements – from the more individualistic to the more collective – are often intertwined and practised simultaneously (de Moor and Verhaegen, 2020). Apart from actions focusing squarely on lifestyle change, citizen-consumers may also organise and mobilise to challenge existing economic and political organisations. One node

of literature focuses on social movement organisations for political consumption, who frame lifestyle as political and mobilise the public beyond changing their consumption. For instance, in the alternative food movement, organisations conduct coordinated campaigns to channel collective actions targeting key players in the food market such as regulatory authorities, as seen in France (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013; 2015), Italy (Grazino and Forno, 2012; Forno and Grazino, 2014) and Switzerland (Huber and Lorenzini, 2022), to name but a few. The Campaign for Clean Clothes is another example: activists incorporate the ‘politics behind products’ in its frames and organise citizen-consumers in protests and petitions to pressure unethical corporations (Balsiger, 2010). This type of lifestyle politics tends to construct frames that problematise instituted actors (such as powerful corporations or political parties) as well as economic and political *systems* (diagnostics), and propose political actions alongside consumption and lifestyle change, seeking to effect profound normative, cultural and political modifications in society (prognostics).

Another node of literature, focusing on subcultures such as degrowth, slow-food and eco-villages, shows how lifestyle becomes a site of everyday resistance against dominant paradigms of production and consumption under growth-oriented, corporate-controlled capitalism. These communities attempt to build modes of provisioning outside of the market economy and reconfigure systems of material flows (Schlosberg and Coles, 2016). For example, they promote the growth of local, community-owned food systems (Dubuisson-Quellier et al, 2011), and create channels for sharing, freecycling and reuse to allow un-consumption (Foden, 2012; Bossy, 2014). With a particular focus on the material dimension of collective action, this form of lifestyle politics is also referred to as the ‘neo materialist movement’ (Laamanen et al, 2023). Participants in these movements ‘prefigure’ change, that is, they create the change that they want to see in the future through building experimental and alternative social arrangements and institutions in the present (Yates, 2015). As a result, the radical, systemic diagnostic frames are accompanied by prognostic frames that seek to reconfigure social order rather than attempting to reform it through political participation.

In the previous paragraphs, I discussed the diverse action repertoires of lifestyle politics and their associated frames seen among citizen-consumers based in the West. Lifestyle politics has to operate within the unique structures of opportunities and constraints in China. Increasing disposable income and purchasing power could imply more ‘empowered’ Chinese consumers who can ‘vote with their wallets’ to boycott and boycott based on their own beliefs, creating possibilities for individualised political consumerism. As a matter of fact, green consumption is an important component to the country’s plan to peak CO₂ emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. In its recently released *Implementation Plan for Promoting Green Consumption*, the state specified a series of measures to ‘comprehensively promote the green transformation of consumption in various fields such as food, clothing, housing, transportation, and tourism’ and ‘accelerate the formation of a simple, moderate, green, low carbon, civilized and healthy life’ (author’s translation, National Development and Reform Commission of the People’s Republic of China, 2022). Further, while environmental policies in China are developed within an elite-led technocratic and managerial regime and implemented in a top-down fashion, there are narrow, controlled and institutionalised channels to participate in decision-making, such as demanding

information disclosure, participation in environmental impact assessment, and reporting environmental wrongdoings.¹

In the meantime, tightening control over civil society, expanding censorship and surveillance, and heightened suppression of rights activists have significantly hindered adversarial social and environmental movements. Tactics targeting the state employed by political consumers in advanced democracies face substantial risks of oppression in China. Previous high-profile environmental protests against large infrastructures (for example, incineration and chemical plants, hydropower dams) in China have garnered ample scholarly attention. However, in these protests, citizen-activists have often framed their grievances in state-approved terms as a strategy to better negotiate with the authoritarian state. This approach, referred to as ‘rule-based activism’ (Johnson, 2010), aims to pressure local officials to uphold existing rules rather than challenge broader systems of environmental governance in China. Similarly, civil society organisations (CSOs) focused on sustainable consumption also tend to adopt ruled-based advocacy, primarily concentrating on supplying technical expertise to authorities and supporting their implementation of existing policies (Schroeder, 2015). The limited existing literature on political consumption in China indicates a prevalence of individualised movement frames and limited collective actions among practitioners (Wahn, 2019). Moreover, scholars argue that boycott activities, such as buying organic food and energy efficient products, align better with China’s ‘non-adversarial’ political culture compared to boycott, even when targeting economic actors exclusively (Zhang et al, 2018). Nonetheless, there are frames that target systems and efforts to build alternative provision systems, as observed in the alternative food network in Beijing. However, they rely heavily on existing infrastructures for their survival, using shopping malls and five-star hotel lobbies to attract consumers and social media networks to facilitate online sales (Wahn, 2020).

In summary, lifestyle politics encompasses distinct movement frames: some attribute great significance to individual lifestyle changes and lifestyle diffusion, while others emphasise the indispensability of collective political actions, or the promises of prefigurative politics. These frames also differ in their views on who should be targeted (individuals, communities, the private sector or the state) and what the primary action should be (shifting habits, changing policies and institutions). In China, lifestyle politics beyond promoting individual projects of green consumption and sustainable lifestyle face a multitude of challenges. Therefore, it is highly relevant to examine how citizen-consumers frame consumption and lifestyle, navigate the field of opportunities and constraints, and scale the movement in a context of limited political manoeuvring.

Analytical tool: participant frames

In this article, I use ‘participant frames’ as an analytical tool to explore bottom-up meaning-making in lifestyle movements. Framing is now a well-established field of research in social movement studies. It refers to the processes through which actors construct, produce and maintain meanings and beliefs to mobilise movement constituents, demobilise antagonists and gather support from bystanders or observers (Snow and Benford, 1988). Through framing, movement actors ‘simplify and condense “the world out there” by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of actions’ (Snow and Benford, 1992: 137).

These processes of interpretation, attribution and articulation often involve three core framing tasks (Snow and Benford, 1988; 1992). The first task, diagnostic framing, involves the identification of causes and responsibilities, and often also assignment of blame. The second task, prognostic framing, suggests solutions to the diagnosed problem and specifies strategies, tactics and targets. And the third task, motivational framing, entails a ‘call to arms’ to engage and recruit people in movement activities.

Most empirical studies of framing focus on frames produced by social movement organisations and leading activists. ‘Ordinary’ citizens who participate and engage in the movement, who are not activists or movement leaders (also referred to as rank-and-file participants, recruits), have been mostly considered for their capacity to ‘resonate’ and ‘align’ with the movement frames (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al, 2018). The recast of frames as an activity of movement leadership neglects the interactive and participatory processes behind the scenes (Oliver and Johnston, 2000). After all, frames are subject to continuous negotiation, modification and reconstitution through various social interactions with participants at movement gatherings and campaigns. Furthermore, organisational frames do not allow access to the range of beliefs and values within the movement made up of a field of actors as opposed to a unified entity (Gamson and Meyer, 1996). The focus on movement leaders to the neglect of ordinary participants risks an elite bias. As Törnberg and Törnberg (2021: 287) argue, treating framing as a top-down activity to be passed on to the participant is at best a unilateral focus on frame resonance and alignment, and, at worst, ‘a misrepresentation of the movement by their leaders’. To respond to the monolithic focus on organisational and activist frames, several studies have proposed to study grassroots and participant frames in social movements (Wahlström et al, 2013; Svensson and Wahlström, 2021; Törnberg and Törnberg, 2021). These frames appraise ways in which ordinary participants attach meanings to and organise interpretations of events and phenomena, which then help guide them in their actions. Frames emerged from the grassroots could be ‘half-cooked’, containing fragments of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational elements; they could also be hesitant, even contradictory and provocative (Törnberg and Törnberg, 2021: 287).

I also argue that participant frames can encompass both goal-oriented, strategic communication and more ‘authentic’ understandings of the world based on an individual’s own biographical and experiential background. This aligns with the Goffman’s (1974) definition of framing, which broadly refers to the activity of articulating and applying frames of interpretation. In the context of China, publicly available data, such as organisational websites, newsletters, flyers and social media accounts, are products of pervasive censorship. Studying frames through secure, private and intimate interviews helps uncover the complex and sometimes convoluted processes of meaning-making and may yield richer data than highly sanitised public materials. Furthermore, participant and grassroots frames are well suited for lifestyle movements, which tend to be more dispersed and loosely organised compared to traditional movements. Ordinary lifestyle practitioners actively participate in frame construction and diffusion. I am not arguing that public frames produced by leaders and lifestyle entrepreneurs (Haenfler et al, 2012) lack influence on the ground; rather, I emphasise that participants frames are equally valuable resources for gaining a fuller understanding of the movement as a whole.

Research site, method and data

This study is primarily based on 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ZW lifestyle practitioners in urban China who are members of a community known as Gozerowaste. Founded in Beijing in 2016 by a ZW enthusiast who documented her journey on Chinese social media sites Douban and WeChat under the name 'Gozerowaste', the community first gained local traction in Beijing. The founder began organising meetups with like-minded individuals, forming a small community. As her readership grew, she created online groups for readers to discuss ZW and environmentalism. Gradually, volunteers across cities were recruited to coordinate local communities, organise ZW events (for example, second-hand swaps, ZW picnics and workshops), and manage city chat groups on WeChat. The community now has 22 local chapters and more than 10,000 members active both virtually and physically. It is important to note that Gozerowaste is not a registered CSO in China. It operates without regular funding or salaried staff; it is a loosely organised, hybrid lifestyle community supported by a network of volunteers.²

Interview participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling via ZW virtual groups on WeChat. The recruitment notice explained the research background, objective and the profile of the researcher, the format of their participation, the ethical protocols, and specifically looked for 'people actively involved in environmental protection' (*huanbao xingdongpai*) to join. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation and sample diversity (in terms of city, age and socioeconomic status) were achieved. The participants, aged between 18 and 48, reside in different cities, represent various income groups and work in different occupations.³ They are generally well-educated, and marginalised groups were not represented in this sample. Additionally, the majority of the participants are female, in line with the community's demographics in China, as per an internal survey conducted by the founder. While the sampled participants in this study may not be fully representative of the ZW community due to self-selection bias, intentional efforts were made to ensure diversity, aiming to capture a range of perspectives for a nuanced exploration of the phenomenon. A detailed breakdown of the social demographic characteristics is provided in the [Appendix](#).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online between 2020 and 2021, with durations ranging from 60 to 180 minutes, averaging 90 minutes, and were recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews first explored participants' involvement in ZW, the integration of new habits and routines in their everyday life, and their efforts to promote ZW. They were encouraged to discuss the meanings, significance and effects of ZW, to them personally and to society at large. Participants also responded to questions aimed at understanding how they framed ZW: for instance, the root causes of the waste and environmental issues they had identified, potential solutions and actions that can be taken, motivations for individuals to act, and their methods for promoting ZW to those in their surroundings. In addition to the interviews, this article draws insights from a three-month virtual ethnography of four closed Gozerowaste virtual groups (average 470 members). This allowed for the observation of group conversations and participation in virtual events during the COVID-19 pandemic. The observations were documented through fieldnotes which include both original exchanges and the researcher's reflections. Both the interviews (full transcripts) and the fieldnotes were coded in Atlas.ti following a

codebook developed based on the analytical tool. Selected citations were translated into English, anonymised and de-identified in the article.

Framing in the zero waste lifestyle movement

Diagnostic frames

While participants assumed great responsibility for the environmental impacts of their own consumption, the vast majority understood consumption in relation to the wider economic, social and cultural forces that underpin consumption. Many held the view that the saturation of consumerism in everyday life, led by consumer goods companies and the culture industry, ‘manipulates’ individuals into what they deemed to be excessive and unsustainable consumption. One participant explained her diagnosis this way:

‘What lies behind the waste problems of today is most fundamentally the culture of consumerism. Businesses are constantly creating new needs and bombarding you with advertisements ... information like this is so pervasive, we are inundated by it, so we are always influenced to a certain degree. I was totally deceived and manipulated [by these businesses]:’ (P, female, Shenzhen)

Participants articulated the responsibilities of businesses – particularly e-commerce, food delivery and fast fashion giants – for the waste crisis. They reprimanded that these companies spur overconsumption and produce massive amount of waste while generating ‘haunting’ numbers of carbon footprints. They condemned the companies’ unwillingness to shift fundamental business practices. An active member of the Shenzhen ZW community crystallised her diagnosis this way: “[T]hese conglomerates reached their hands into the pockets of millions of consumers, they filled our lives with plastics and their shareholders with money. But at the end of the day, the whole society but them pays the price of plastic pollution.”

There was also a shared understanding that the state is complicit in the waste crisis, for its quiescence – if not support – of these consumer goods giants as engines of growth. In the last decade, the concept of green development has been mainstreamed in state policies, and more recently, ‘ecological civilisation’ (*shengtai wenming*) has been written into China’s constitution as the guiding framework for the country’s social and environmental transition. People discussed this positive change but cast doubt on the efficacy of such policies within the growth paradigm. Many pinpointed capitalistic market-economy as the main culprit behind the waste and environmental crisis. S, a young entrepreneur, diagnosed the ‘deep-rooted influence of market economy’ in all sectors of society, positing that “when capitalism and market economy become the only truth, many problems arise: overproduction and overconsumption keeps on spiraling”.

There was a shared sentiment that the government’s environmental actions are ‘too little, too late’. One concrete example that they brought up was the clumsy, protracted development of municipal recycling and composting programmes. Since 2000, waste-sorting and recycling programmes have been rolling out in selected cities in China, but poor implementation and lack of enforcement have led to few successes. Under such circumstances, the vast majority of municipal waste has been collected unsorted, with the remaining sorted by the informal sector. This situation

changed in the summer of 2019, when Shanghai became the first Chinese city to legally mandate waste separation at the source, but the COVID-19 pandemic has halted progress of these programmes throughout China. As a result, many ZW practitioners resorted to home composting; but technical and practical difficulties had been common (see Zhan, 2022a). One participant criticised the government's environmental performance this way:

'It is inconceivable that this task [home composting] is left to the hands of individuals. So many people work long hours, live in tiny city apartments, and earn a modest income. Do you know that home compost systems cost a fortune? We shouldn't demand individuals to do this, it is the government's role to create systems that make ZW accessible ... I see little progress in Beijing over the years.' (J, female, Beijing)

In summary, waste and environmental issues are predominantly attributed to the rise of consumerism under the state-led, growth-oriented capitalistic market economy, within which businesses continue to grow unchecked and environmental issues are relegated to the periphery.

Prognostic frames

Responding to this diagnosis, one prominent prognostic frame advocates the power of everyday resistance to consumerism and the market economy. To activate this prognostic, ZW participants emphasised the importance of personal 'awakening' or 'enlightenment' (*juexing* or *juezhi*). This awakening, broadly speaking, denotes a sense of heightened awareness and clarity over life; more specifically, it embodies post-materialistic values that could allegedly elevate individuals out of the spell of consumerism. According to the participants, the awakening could be nurtured through a variety of mindfulness and introspective practices that connect individuals to their inner self and to nature. Introspection was understood as the first step towards freedom from consumerism. 'Woke' individuals will not be manipulated by artificial needs or enticed to convey social status through consumption; instead, they consume only 'when there is an authentic need from within'. The second essential component of this frame concerns community organising to build an alternative system of material flow outside that of the market economy. Participating in the ZW community often involves organising physical events and building online spaces to facilitate freecycling, up-cycling, reuse and exchange, so that 'unconsumption' can be achieved. In addition, no monetary transactions could take place within these spaces so that 'exchanges are kept pure, based on trust and human connection'. This way, participants resist the saturation of economic logic in everyday life and challenge the capitalist market economy.

Another prominent prognostic frame accentuates the power of consumers in shifting business practices, through signalling. It is believed that lifestyle choices signal consumer preferences to businesses, and therefore have the potential to impact business practices. They brought up examples of recent actions taken by popular consumer brands that support practices of extended producer responsibility. This frame of consumer power conveys the message that lifestyle choices collectively signal new demands that will hopefully be picked up by the market, leading to norm shifts in both the supply and the demand sides. Within this frame, there is another thread

that focuses on direct engagement with powerful individuals, such as business leaders or the government cadre, who were believed to have more power to effect change. Recognising that bureaucratic support is essential in supporting ZW (for example, building better waste infrastructures, enforcing the plastics ban, supporting sustainable consumption and production), a few ZW citizen-activists tried to engage street-level bureaucrats to implement programmes for a ZW community. In a singular case, a participant was able to recruit a businesswoman who owns several clothing factories in China to join the community, who then committed to reduce waste and pollution in her factories. She explained her reasoning this way:

‘I am often asked, “You guys are only a few thousands, it is so little. Our city alone has many millions of people, what impact do you have?” I had always known that it is not something you can achieve within years. ... I tell them, right now we are adding people, along the way, we may reach business leaders, people with influence, we will be multiplying! All we do is to persevere, keep influencing people within our reach, and keep spreading our messages.’ (Y, female, Shenzhen)

Motivational frames

The motivational frames, constructed by participants to motivate people in their surroundings into joining the movement, primarily focus on the tangible benefits of a ZW lifestyle – reducing waste, simplifying life and enhancing well-being. They intentionally minimise ‘big moralising talks about the environment and the climate’, and appeal to individuals’ search for well-being, which was considered to be more palatable to the general public. The first motivational frame focuses on the efficacy of ZW at minimising domestic waste. Indeed, while the actual environmental impact of ZW is unknown, all participants emphasised the visible, drastic reduction in household waste when they advocate for ZW. For them, waste reduction is a commendable achievement, and a goal in itself. One participant explained its significance this way: ‘by reducing our waste, we reduce the amount of garbage for landfill and incineration, reduce the burden of waste workers, and the strain on the environment’. Highlighting the tangible results in waste reduction also conveys a sense of certainty that does not easily come across when individuals are bombarded with an overwhelming amount of environmental information that can be extremely confusing – as explained by one participant:

‘I learned the huge environmental impacts of meat. And I tried to adopt a plant-based diet. But then I also read about the water footprints of plant-based milk. ... And [the issues with] genetically modified soybeans, because now I eat a lot of tofu and soy products. ... Also should I buy the conscious collection from H&M? What things are truly sustainable? I have so many doubts. ... But with ZW, at least I know it is right, I see it, there are simply so few things that I am sure of these days. And this is what I tell people.’ (L, female, Shanghai)

The second frame focuses on the positive impacts of ZW on people’s well-being. When promoting ZW, participants often spoke of ways in which ZW brings simple

joy to everyday routines, reduces anxieties over material concerns, gives rise to a sense of purpose and enhances overall quality of life (for a more detailed analysis on ZW and wellbeing, see [Zhan, 2022b](#)). Further, they shared how being part of a sustainable community helps build joyful and meaningful connections with like-minded people outside of their professional and friendship circles. Many participants disclosed techniques of persuasion to bring people onboard with ZW. They communicate ZW as a “fun, easy and beautiful” lifestyle experiment accessible to all. With people who already seem to be concerned with waste and environmental issues, participants tended to be more upfront, and used another frame to appeal to people’s moral duties. More specifically, they spoke of the severity of waste problems, the urgency of actions, and the necessity to care for nature and future generations – “starting with the smallest things right here and now”. Some participants shared their encounters with the “dystopian sight of waste” in nature – remote mountains, beaches and oceans – to communicate the severity of the issue. Some recommended popular and sensitising documentaries such as *A Plastic Ocean*, *Chasing Coral*, *The True Cost* and *Plastic China*.⁴ They then discussed how changing consumption and lifestyle to avoid harm to nature is a moral imperative. Another message conveyed by ZW practitioners within this motivational frame underlines the duties of adults, and especially parents, to safeguard nature and its resources for future generations who ‘have a right to survive and thrive’. The various diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames are summarised in [Table 1](#).

Understanding lifestyle activism in China

The research participants started with a systemic, politicised diagnosis, assigning the blame to key political and economic actors. However, they subsequently shifted to a prognosis focuses on community actions that eschews collective political actions and confrontations with the private sector. Finally, they settled on a further depoliticised motivational frame that centres well-being and lifestyle change. The dynamics in framing, characterised by dwindling levels of political ambition, reveals three important, inter-related strategies of lifestyle activism in China: deliberate depoliticisation, constructive engagement and broad lifestyle diffusion.

First, lifestyle activists in ZW deliberately forwent the more critical, political messages in the diagnosis and steered clear of repertoires of contention in its prognostics. As [Schlosberg and Craven \(2019\)](#) observe, lifestyle movements commonly

Table 1: Summary of participant frames

Diagnostic frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the saturation of consumerism in everyday life • the reckless business practices of consumer good giants • the lax and insufficient environmental and climate policies under state-led, growth-oriented capitalism
Prognostic frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practice everyday resistance against consumerism • build alternative systems of material flows in the community • signal to businesses and aggregate to shift cultural norms
Motivational frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the tangible effects on waste reduction • the well-being benefits of a zero-waste lifestyle • the moral duties towards nature and future generations

face the challenge of ‘maintaining agonism when the idea is to spread, diffuse, and replicate one’s practice’. By toning down radical ideas and political messaging, lifestyle movements can render themselves more palatable to the general population and therefore recruit more supporters and adherents (de Moor et al, 2021). More importantly, in the context of China, depoliticisation helps mitigate political risks and prevent potential suppression. The community stays rather distant from the broader movement for ZW in the country led by the China Zero Waste Alliance (*lingfeiqi lianmeng*), consisting of more than 60 environmental CSOs engaged in waste-related matters. Leading CSOs of the Alliance are committed to changing waste management systems in the country and engaging in policy advocacy; some also share an affinity with grassroots environmental protests (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022). Participants in the ZW lifestyle community have distanced themselves from the work of the Alliance and view its work as ‘theoretical guidance’ rather than a potential field of actions (based on interviews). Depoliticisation is also observed in the community group chats, where discussions on subjects considered remotely politically sensitive have been discouraged or silenced. This serves to avoid extensive online surveillance and protect the community space: chats discussing sensitised topics risk being censored, dissolved and banned. It also helps to prevent potential conflicts or at least feelings of uneasiness in the community space, allowing for a convivial atmosphere and creating a sense of group cohesion. I documented the following episode during my virtual observation:

A new member of the group (female student in her early 20s) launched a discussion on Fridays for Future protests. She talked about the urgency of climate actions and expressed her desire to organise an event (not a demonstration) on climate politics in a southern city in China. An active member of the community immediately responded that it was not a good idea to discuss this in the chat, another person said it could ‘explode’ the chat [*zha qun*, a Chinese expression for online censorship which results in the group’s dissolution]. Another active member said that this community is dedicated to ‘doing real work’ instead of chanting empty political slogans. The young student was practically silenced, and she did not continue the conversation.⁵

Second, despite a systemic and ‘radical’ diagnosis, lifestyle activists opted for constructive engagement with political and economic actors, seeking modest, incremental changes rather than structural transformations. This approach can be attributed to a pragmatic assessment of political opportunities and a material need for resource support. Regardless of how critical they may be of the state’s past environmental performance or how pessimistic they are of the country’s transition into a post-growth or degrowth society, participants recognised the indispensability of urgent, systemic, state-led climate actions. They considered gaining institutional support highly beneficial to the movement’s diffusion (based on the interviews). While the window of opportunity for agonistic environmental movement may be closing, opportunities are emerging through institutional collaboration. Many of the research participants have used established channels to report wrongdoings of polluting companies, for instance. A small number of participants, who aspire to pursue a career in environmental work after their engagement with ZW, have received funding from local government to support environmental education in the

city through the ‘government procurement of public services’ scheme.⁶ On the one hand, these lifestyle activists can be viewed as having been co-opted and converted into agents of oppressive institutions. On the other hand, small grassroots, resource-poor community organisations face ongoing struggles to stay above the water when other avenues for resource mobilisation are severely restricted. Collaboration with local authorities resemble the strategy of ‘scaling *through* institutions’, which advocates the re-engaging with institutional politics of neo-materialist movements (Laamanen et al, 2023). However, in an authoritarian, one-party regime, civil society has little power to confront, infiltrate or manoeuvre the institution, or to ‘use the tools of the state to recreate it from within’ (Schlosberg and Craven, 2019: 163). Instead, they must align themselves with the governmental policies, render themselves useful to serve the agenda of the powerful, and demonstrate their allegiance to the party-state. The institutional engagement of lifestyle activists thus risks co-optation or, in more severe cases, instrumentalisation to further consolidate authoritarian rule (as seen, for example, in the work of Li and Shapiro, 2020).

Third, lifestyle activists rely on diffusion (that is, reaching people as far and wide as possible) and the aggregation of individual lifestyle change as their primary strategy for social change. They do so through positive, feel-good messaging that highlights pleasure, joyfulness and efficacy of lifestyle change (in terms of waste and consumption reduction, not political responsiveness). This approach is similar to what Kennedy et al (2018) referred to as ‘small-p politics’ observed in eat-local movements in Canadian cities, where the ‘pleasurable, convivial and pragmatic’ aspects of lifestyle engagement are prioritised, and ‘small wins’ are celebrated and idealised. However, beneath the positive communication, there is a widespread sentiment of powerlessness. Participants often do not believe that they “have the power to fight the big environment, the system”, leading to the proclamation that lifestyle activism is “weak, feeble and insignificant” facing the “big environment of fast consumption and overconsumption” embedded in growth-oriented capitalism (direct quotes based on interviews). Fortunately, being a part of the ZW community, witnessing progress together and ‘simply doing something’ about the environmental crisis helped give rise to a sense of agency and hope (for more details, see Zhan, 2022b). Lora-Wainwright (2017) describes a dual reality of environmental activism in China: that acts to claim agency are also infused with resignation. Similarly, participants in ZW act, advocate and aspire alongside deep-rooted feelings of powerlessness. And when fatalism continues to thwart climate actions, communicating joy and hope might help inspire and sustain individual and collective engagement. After all, mobilising more people to confront consumer capitalism requires ‘taking fun seriously’ and offering a positive vision of citizen engagement that is playful, exciting, invigorating, and at the same time less environmentally destructive (Wilk, 2022).

Lifestyle activism focusing on individual lifestyle change and lifestyle diffusion, as seen in the ZW movement in China, may jeopardise the exploration of other potentially effective action repertoires discussed earlier. One of these under-explored repertoires is organised action for political consumption. In this approach, activists engage deeply with politicised consumers committed to targeting companies through anti-corporate campaigns, rather than engaging broadly with a hypothetical political consumerism among mass consumers, as observed in France (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2015; 2021). This approach is categorised as ‘scaling *up*’ by Laamanen et al (2023), with emphasis on amplifying demands and exerting pressure on powerholding

actors such as corporations. Pressuring corporations through targeted campaigns differs from *signalling* through aggregated consumer choices. And lifestyle activists in the ZW movement can benefit from a deeper engagement with organisations in the ZW Alliance to scale up their impact in this regard. Another under-explored avenue involves strengthening and expanding alternative systems of material flow. Referred to as the strategy of ‘scaling out’, this approach aims to establish ‘place-based multi-cause, multi-stakeholder and multi-sector networks and coalitions to “take back the economy”’ (Laamanen et al, 2023: 866). While current efforts of ZW lifestyle activists concentrate on the flow of second-hand goods, expanding into the realm of alternative food networks and emerging energy communities could be a valuable endeavour. These two under-explored action repertoires have the potential to address participants’ political grievances, channel their collective desire for system change, and resist state co-optation without resorting to overt defiance. Exploring these alternative action repertoires may provide lifestyle activists in the ZW movement with additional tools and strategies to bring about meaningful change while avoiding some of the limitations associated with focusing solely on individual lifestyle change and diffusion.

Conclusion

Research in various forms of lifestyle politics underlines both the significance and the limitations of promoting individual consumption and lifestyle transformation as a means of achieving social change. This article contributes to this debate by illuminating how ordinary citizen-activists engaged with ZW in urban China scale the movement towards fostering change. Building on the framing perspective in social movement studies, this study uses ‘participant frames’ as a heuristic device to reveal grassroots processes of meaning-making within lifestyle movements. This study uncovers that the frame constructed by citizen-consumers transitioned from a political and collective diagnosis to a cultural and communal prognosis, and ultimately centred on a ‘call to action’ that emphasises individual and private actions. The ‘dissonance’ in framing, which involves promoting depoliticised actions while being motivated by political grievances and a clear desire for system change, illustrates how citizen-activists navigate structures of opportunities and constraints in China. Through deliberate and strategic depoliticisation, lifestyle activism leans towards constructive engagement with institutional actors rather than contentious confrontation and relies on the diffusion of sustainable lifestyle among the general public as the primary tactic for change. This negotiated, compromised and bargained form of lifestyle politics is practised between resignation and hope: citizen-activists act, advocate and aspire alongside deep-rooted feelings of powerlessness. This article concludes with a participant’s reflective words, which underscores the complex and challenging nature of promoting social change through lifestyle activism in China:

‘I joined ZW because there are too many empty talks of big ideas in environmental protection and too little action. I was very convinced that only concrete actions will bring about change. But I slowly realise, these actions do not work either. The community is very action-oriented, but it seems like we couldn’t move past the domestic sphere – shopping, cooking, eating, cleaning and so on. I haven’t figured out a path, but I know we should

try more powerful actions together because this is simply not enough.’ (Z, female, Shenyang)

Notes

¹ Since the 2000s, the State Council has formulated rules around people’s right to information and to participation. The most recent revision to China’s Environmental Protection Law in 2014 spelled out that citizens ‘shall have the right to obtain environmental information and participate in and oversee environmental protection’ and ‘the right to report environmental pollution or ecological damage’ to relevant supervisory authorities.

² The founder registered Gozerowaste as a social enterprise and received a small grant in 2018 from a local philanthropic foundation known as the Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecology under a scheme that provides early-stage seed funding to not-for-profit environmental enterprises. It is easier to obtain registration as an enterprise than a CSO in China. This grant supported a series of events and volunteer trainings that contributed to the community’s rapid growth. No other sources of funding were disclosed to the author.

³ None of the participants were employed by the government or state-owned enterprises at the time of the interview based on self-reporting. Two participants were employed in the public sector, both as schoolteachers.

⁴ The first three are well-known international environmental documentaries, and *Plastic China* is a Chinese documentary which looks into the plastic recycling industry. Within a year of its release in 2016, the documentary was censored by authorities; in 2017, China announced the plastics import ban. *Beijing Besieged by Waste* is another instrumental work by the same director, inspiring many Chinese people to reflect on the issue of waste. These documentaries are not readily available on mainstream Chinese streaming platforms, and participants exchanged ways to bypass censorship to view them online.

⁵ In the interviews, participants were asked about protests ‘abroad’ such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion which have received a decent amount of attention on Chinese social network sites, to gauge their perceptions of political rights and agonism as a tool for social change. While participants were largely sceptical about the tactics of road-blocking, class-skipping and disruptive protests, they applauded the youth activists’ courage and commitment, and discussed how movements like these are critical to spreading awareness, motivating actions and building momentum. However, there was a shared tacit understanding that these topics are off-limits for ZW group chats or events, and none of the participants have launched this discussion in the community space.

⁶ Contracting of social services through public procurement has been adopted in China as an innovation in welfare provision, and also as an attempt to shape state–civil society relations. Increasing public procurement of social services from civil society groups coincides with heightened scrutiny and control of international funding after the introduction of the Overseas NGO Law in 2016, which have a stronger impact on small domestic organisations instead of the more established ones.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the journal editor and two reviewers for their constructive feedback which have helped shape this article into its current form. I am also immensely thankful to Manisha Anantharaman, Marlyne Sahakian, Patrick Schroeder and Marylène Lieber for their feedback on an earlier version of this article. I would like to extend my appreciation to all the participants of the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions Workshop, 'The new climate activism', held in 2021, and in particular to Mattias Wahlström, for his valuable feedback on the conceptual framework.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Appendix: Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants

	N	%
Total	45	100
Gender		
Female	40	89
Male	5	11
Age group		
18–24	9	20
25–34	23	51
35–44	11	24
45–54	2	4
Marital status		
Married	16	36
Unmarried	29	64
Educational attainment		
Bachelor's degree	31	69
Graduate degree	8	18
Some college or associate degree	6	13
Occupation classification		
Education	7	16
Students	7	16
Community and social services	6	13
Computer and engineering	5	11
Home-maker/self-employed	4	9
Sales and retail	4	9
Arts, design, entertainment and sports	4	9
Business and financial operations	3	7
Office and administrative support	2	4
Media and journalism	2	4
Personal care and service	1	2
Location: city		
Tier 1: Shanghai	11	24
Tier 1: Shenzhen	11	24
Tier 1: Beijing	8	18
New Tier 1 city	7	16
Tier 2 city	4	9
Tier 3 city	1	2
Tier 4 city	3	7