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Morally Grounded Activism in Urban China: Ethics and Prefigurative Politics at the Public– Private Nexus

Modern China

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Abstract

The existing literature on environmental activism in China remains largely framed by the state–society paradigm, with limited attention to how ethics, relationships, and subjectivity shape activist practices. In response, this article combines the theoretical lenses of prefigurative politics and intimate activism to propose the concept of “morally grounded activism.” Based on an ethnographic study of an ecological store and community hub that promotes sustainable living, the concept enables an analysis of everyday environmentalism as both transformation-driven and an ethical response to environmental crisis. In doing so, it moves beyond framing everyday environmentalism as a strategic response to growing repression of civil society under Xi Jinping, or as resulting from the deflection of responsibility onto individuals. In turn, it makes a theoretical intervention by calling for

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greater attention to subtle forms of agency and to the blurred space between the public and private spheres in China's evolving political landscape.

Keywords

environmental activism, everyday environmentalism, prefigurative politics, ethics and activism, public–private nexus

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has exerted growing political control over virtually all aspects of social life, including a widespread crackdown on civil society (Fu and Distelhorst, 2018). Environmental activists—long benefiting from the perception that their work was relatively politically benign—have faced markedly greater scrutiny over the past decade (Xia, 2025). While the CCP has committed to addressing environmental degradation through the vision of an “ecological civilization,” this commitment has been accompanied by a shift toward a state-led¹ governance model that frames environmental protection primarily as a matter of regime security and explicitly rejects “Western” notions of civil society as incompatible with China's one-party system (Kostka and Zhang, 2018; Li and Shapiro, 2020).

How should scholars theorize the persistence of environmental activism under such intensifying top-down control? Existing scholarship has largely approached this question through a state-centered lens, treating the party-state as the primary—often exclusive—counterpart for activism. Research has shown, for example, how activists have sought to “accommodate power” by increasing transparency, cultivating closer ties with officials, avoiding politically sensitive topics, and emphasizing loyalty to the CCP (O'Brien, 2023). Given the expanding reach of the state, this focus is understandable. Yet it risks overlooking forms of activism that do not primarily seek to influence state actors.

In contexts of heightened repression, adaptation may also involve partial withdrawal from direct state engagement. Rather than persisting in efforts to shape policy, some activists turn inward, focusing on transforming everyday practices and social relations through seemingly mundane and low-key actions. These forms of engagement are easily dismissed as politically inconsequential or as evidence of depoliticization. We argue that such interpretations are analytically limiting and call for new conceptual tools capable of capturing how activism operates under conditions of constraint.

This article advances the concept of “morally grounded activism” to explain how subtle, everyday forms of activism can be politically consequential even

when they result in only modest material change. Drawing on insights from prefigurative politics and Manuel Tironi's (2018) feminist-inspired notion of "intimate activism," the concept shifts attention away from direct state confrontation and toward ethical obligation, care, endurance, and relationship building. Morally grounded activism highlights forms of agency that operate at the intersection of the public and private spheres and challenges scholars to rethink what counts as "impact" in politically constrained contexts.

Our theoretical intervention is grounded in an ethnographic study of "everyday environmentalism" in urban China. Everyday environmentalism—understood as the incorporation of practices such as green consumption, upcycling, veganism or vegetarianism, and "zero-waste" living into daily life—has received growing scholarly attention (Forno and Wahlen, 2022). However, existing research has focused predominantly on liberal democracies, where political freedoms enabling such practices are often assumed (Eckersley, 2020). Far less attention has been paid to illiberal regimes. In the Xi era, expanding state control arguably renders spaces typically considered private, such as the household and small community settings, particularly significant as sites for engagement with public and political concerns. Examining these spaces in contemporary China therefore offers both empirical and conceptual leverage.

Empirically, the article is based on nine months of ethnographic research at Woodland (a pseudonym),² a sustainable living store and community hub in a large, economically developed city on China's eastern seaboard. We analyze how participants sought to promote sustainable living practices and the challenges they encountered. Rather than interpreting these efforts in terms of individualized responsibility or strategic depoliticization in response to contracting political opportunity structures (Zhan, 2024; Lu, 2024), we argue that they are better understood as expressions of morally grounded activism.

Conceptually, the article makes three core claims. First, morally grounded activism foregrounds ethical obligation—including care and endurance—as a central driver of activism. Second, it locates activism in the intersubjective realm at the public–private nexus. Third, it identifies political significance in the cultivation of social ties and subjectivities, rather than limiting impact to observable policy or institutional change. Together, these claims open up new ways for China scholars—and scholars of activism more broadly—to move beyond state-centered approaches and to take everyday, morally inflected forms of activism seriously.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the political context for environmental activism in contemporary China. We then introduce the analytical framework of morally grounded activism,

followed by a discussion of our ethnographic methodology and an analysis of the Woodland case. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the concept for the study of activism under conditions of political constraint and beyond.

Environmental Activism in China and the Limitations of the State–Society Paradigm

The emergence of environmental activism in China during the 1990s and 2000s attracted significant scholarly attention. Understandably, most studies focused on the relationship between activism and the state, seeking to explain how and why environmental activism could take root in an authoritarian political context. In particular, they focused on civil society's degree of autonomy relative to the state and how China's fragmented authoritarian political system both constrained and facilitated green activism (Yang, 2005; Spires, 2011). For example, Peter Ho (2007) highlighted how environmental NGOs (ENGOS) became "embedded" in the state through forging mutually beneficial relations with sympathetic party-state officials, especially those working in the environmental domain. This enabled ENGOS to exert influence without overtly challenging the one-party political system. Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun's (2007) account of the emergence of a "green public sphere" in China since the 2000s bespoke a pluralization of actors—including campaigners, journalists, scientists, and international institutions—involved in shaping ideas and practices of sustainability, but the state remained central to their analysis, albeit in terms of the internal tensions between different levels of government. Similarly, studies of environmental contention showed how pollution victims engaged in rightful resistance and boundary-spanning contention to seek justice while continuing to profess loyalty to the country's one-party system (see Deng and Yang, 2013; O'Brien and Li, 2006). The state also loomed large in analyses of other actors, including environmental lawyers, journalists, and artists (Stern, 2013; Geall, 2018; Johnson and Fürst, 2022), and their roles in shaping the green public sphere (Yang and Calhoun, 2007).

Under Xi, the centrality of environmental governance and the pursuit of "ecological civilization" has entailed much more top–down control over the green public sphere. New restrictions on foreign NGOs and overseas funding have affected the shape of the green public sphere and required environmental campaigners to frame their concerns and strategies carefully if they want to survive, let alone succeed. While for a short period before 2013 some ENGOS had aligned more closely with grassroots concerns, since Xi's ascent

to power they have kept some distance from citizens (Wang and Wang, 2020). Indeed, if the Chinese state has a particular “conditional tolerance” (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022: 120) for ENGOs whose environmental goals align with its own, tolerance for autonomous environmental data disclosure, confrontational approaches, and “negative” social mobilization has decreased substantially (Fu and Distelhorst, 2018; Li and Shapiro, 2020). For instance, environmental monitoring initiatives that draw on citizen data have become increasingly orchestrated by the state (Hsu, Yeo, and Weinfurter, 2020). This confirms that under Xi public participation has become more institutionalized and subsumed within state initiatives. Academic studies, congruently, have continued to place the state at the center of the analysis.

Waste-related advocacy, which is most closely related to our case study, has evolved in ways that roughly mirror the broader shift in environmentalism from contention to collaboration with the state. As Amy Zhang (2024) has noted, beginning in the late 1990s the Chinese state reframed the issue of waste from a hygiene concern to a “crisis” caused by growing quantities of rubbish that were overwhelming existing infrastructure. The state proposed technological solutions that focused on recycling waste, converting it into energy via “waste-to-energy” incinerators, and confining it to the social and geographic margins. This reconfiguration of waste was contested by a range of grassroots actors who came together to articulate alternative visions of waste management (Zhang, 2024; see also Lin and Kao, 2020). Activists focused in particular on mounting opposition to waste treatment infrastructure, most notably incinerators (Bondes, 2019; Johnson, Lora-Wainwright, and Lu, 2018; Wong, 2016). Scholarship also examined how ENGOs formed alliances to influence state policies (Lu and Steinhardt, 2022; Lin and Wong, 2023) and analyzed emerging forms of collaborative governance between state and non-state actors in the waste sector (Xie, Zhu, and Benson, 2022; Arantes, 2023).

More recently, the CCP’s promotion of “green living” 绿色生活方式 under its ecological civilization agenda has legitimized the growth of citizen-led sustainable living (waste reduction) initiatives even as tolerance for social movements has otherwise declined. This opens up fertile ground for understanding changing activism in China. In academic accounts of these initiatives, however, the state continues to remain central to the analysis. Virginie Arantes (2023), for instance, argues that the state’s promotion of waste sorting in Shanghai is designed to produce a moralized form of citizenship whereby behaving in a “green” manner (as defined by the state) is akin to being a “good” citizen (see also Qin and Owen, 2021). Recent forms of zero-waste activism have similarly been analyzed as a strategic response to growing restrictions on other forms of activism under Xi. For Danning Lu (2024:

5), “the avoidance of political dissent and the crucial role of [the] internet” explains the emergence of China’s zero-waste movement. Meanwhile, Mallory Xinyu Zhan (2024) focuses on how tightening political control under Xi has spawned new forms of green citizenship based on activeness, dutifulness, and pragmatism.

Although valuable, these studies still foreground the role of the state as a structural determinant to activism, thereby overlooking the potential for a more nuanced set of entanglements that better reflect lived reality (Zhang, 2024). While we agree with Zhan (2024: 1034) that “citizens are left with little option but to conform to what the party state deems as appropriate and desirable conduct,” this is not the only, or even the most important, way they make sense of their engagement with everyday environmentalism. Maintaining a focus on the state as the inevitable counterpart for everyday environmentalism overshadows the role of participants’ subjectivities and aspirations.

A limited number of studies have moved beyond a state-centric approach to provide a more nuanced perspective on individuals’ agency in a one-party setting. Based on collaborative research in a range of heavily polluted rural field sites, the concept of “resigned activism” (Lora-Wainwright, 2021) also highlighted less visible forms of activism that do not target systemic change but rather making life more livable while pragmatically accepting pollution as inevitable. Amy Zhang (2024) developed the concept of “ecological collectives” through her ethnographic study of changing waste management regimes in Guangzhou. Ecological collectives are flexible, temporary, and horizontal “nascent political communities” based on “modes of gathering and political articulations across difference that emerged alongside the state’s environmental projects” (Zhang, 2024: 23). Instead of taking for granted the existence of a “public” that enjoys freedom of association and speech, Zhang’s concept prompts questions of “*how* a shared object of concern can bring communities together to generate social and political effects where and when the state tightly monitors and limits public action” (Zhang, 2024: 23). Similarly, David Palmer (2019) uses the term “microcivil spheres” to describe temporary spaces, such as informal gatherings, where civil ideas are enacted, albeit in a restrictive wider environment. For Palmer, China’s “environmental movement” is better understood as a network of interconnected microcivil spheres at various scales, any of which could collapse at any time.

The concepts of microcivil spheres and ecological collectives resonate with what Becky Yang Hsu (2025) describes as ordinary “modes of association.” These are practices and social interactions that take shape in the private realm of the individual or family, but which nonetheless contribute to improving life beyond these realms. She argues that the public–private dichotomy

“doesn’t resonate with many individuals in China,” and highlights how civic action often proceeds from individuals and their families before extending outward to influence the wider community and society (Hsu, 2025: 1).

We take inspiration from these scholars’ efforts to address subtle forms of agency, challenge the public–private dichotomy, and focus on forms of soci-ality, but in addition we draw attention to the moral undertones of everyday practices. To fully grasp the transformative potential of apparently mundane efforts to live sustainably, we need to move away from the state-centric approach and rethink how this potential for environmental and societal impact may be evaluated differently if we focus on moral values and on the blurred space between the private and public spheres (as Hsu advocates).

Efforts to hold together social structure, individual agency, and the question of moral value are perhaps most explicitly developed in the scholarship on ordinary ethics (Lambek, 2010; Mattingly, 2018; Das, 2007). At its core, this literature pursues a move away from focusing on structural conditions of social life toward examining individuals’ attempts to reflect on or negotiate moral rules and frameworks (Stafford, 2013: 4). This approach also attends to the coexistence of multiple and shifting moral frameworks, which may at times be contradictory, but which together become sources of meaning and value across space and time. From this perspective, “what really matters” (Kleinman, 2006) varies across different domains of social life—private, public, and the in-between—and different levels of society beyond the state–society binary. By foregrounding individuals and their ethical practices, this perspective opens a more nuanced account of China’s shifting moral landscape, and how actors are shaping it through everyday practices. To refocus our attention on these dimensions and move beyond a state-centric approach, we propose the concept of morally grounded activism.

Between Prefigurative Politics and Intimate Activism: Morally Grounded Activism

Morally grounded activism refers to a distinct form of everyday activism that is neither confined to the public nor the private but instead unfolds in the intersubjective realm between individuals and society, where ethical commitments, relationships, and small acts of care take on political significance. In developing this conceptual tool for making sense of everyday activism, we have combined two existing approaches concerned with everyday activism: prefigurative politics and intimate activism. We briefly discuss each of these in turn.

In the prefigurative politics framework, activists bypass the state and instead “channel political effort into demonstrating in the present the types of

social relations and practices sought at a future point in time” (Dyson and Jeffrey, 2018: 573; Schlosberg, 2025). Instead of relying on political organizations to effect social transformation via the state, prefigurative politics involves directly implementing desirable changes through “being the change you wish to see” (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 641) and gradually building a new society “in the shell of the old” (Leach, 2013: 1). Prefigurative politics is often studied in relation to “autonomous geographies” (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010), namely, demarcated spaces where alternative social arrangements—commonly including participatory democracy—take hold. The Occupy movement is a quintessential example. Yet prefiguration can also infuse daily life (Dyson and Jeffrey, 2018). Rather than focus on establishing geographically contained enclaves, “everyday prefiguration” centers on building stronger social networks within a community (Dyson and Jeffrey, 2018). In analyzing Woodland, we draw on Craig Jeffrey and Jane Dyson’s (2021) framework for investigating prefigurative politics based on its three constituent features of “improvisation,” “institutionalization,” and “impact” (see the subsections below).

Yet studies of prefigurative politics and everyday environmentalism more broadly have focused overwhelmingly on liberal democratic contexts, where citizens are free to organize and express demands, with scant attention paid to regimes where such liberties cannot be taken for granted. This lacuna is unfortunate, given that private spaces are potentially important sites for engagement with public matters in illiberal settings. A second limitation with prefigurative politics is that it sometimes risks slipping into teleology, whereby societal impact via institutionalization and scaling up of prefigurative initiatives are seen as the ultimate goal. Relatedly, the prefigurative politics literature pays little attention to subjectivity, a central theme in our data.

Feminist scholarship has long highlighted that subjectivity and ethics are inextricably tied to activism, and therefore the latter requires a careful and critical redefinition. Joan Tronto’s (1993) foundational work consolidated the important point that ethical, private, and intimate practices of care are inseparable from the public and political realms. It explicitly critiqued the divide between the public and private spheres upheld in Western moral and political philosophy (see Arendt, 1958) and advocated for a reconsideration of everyday actions as forms of political practice. Asef Bayat (2010) similarly critiqued liberal models of activism based on formal and public participation and argued that “non-movements”—that is, ordinary, incremental, embodied practices—are significant forms of agency. Scholars in the field of environmental politics have likewise shown that upholding a divide between public and private spheres is detrimental to understanding the ways in which environmental injustices simultaneously affect individuals and communities

(Schlosberg, 2007) and the range of ways in which individuals and communities respond (Lora-Wainwright, 2021).

These insights into the political potential incipient in everyday practices are important for our understanding of everyday environmentalism. But at the same time, it is vital not to uphold any pre-formed definitions of what everyday environmentalism might be or of its potential political significance and impact (see Hughes, 2020). Recognizing that “the personal is political” (as the feminist maxim goes, see Hanisch, 1970) should not entail evaluating everyday practices in light of their political or material significance. As we will show, everyday environmentalism is not always oriented toward broader political transformation or the prefiguration of utopian futures—it may be driven by ethical and moral concerns (Tironi, 2018; Lora-Wainwright, 2021) that in turn require critical redefinitions of agency, activism, and impact. Particular moral obligations to the self, family, society, and planetary health more broadly may motivate environmental stewardship even when material impact is negligible (Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 2018). Instead of imagining and striving for an ideal future world, these actions sometimes simply focus on “living well on a damaged planet” (Harms, 2022: 516).

With these shortcomings in mind, we turn to Tironi’s (2018) feminist-inspired concepts of “hypo-interventions” and “intimate activism” that were developed in relation to disempowered people living in highly polluted environments. Hypo-interventions refer to “minimal and unspectacular yet life-enabling practices of caring, cleaning, and healing the ailments of their significant others, human and otherwise” (Tironi, 2018: 438). In contrast to public, high-profile acts of resistance, hypo-interventions are attuned to the rhythms of everyday life. They comprise intimate activism, defined as “ethical response to pervasive chemical harm that emerges through domestic practices of care” (Tironi, 2018: 439). For Tironi, intimate activism is a form of politics located “at the intersections of passiveness and action, coping and contesting, reclusion and mobilization and feeling and knowing” (Tironi, 2018: 439). It is “based in ethics rather than achievement” (Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 2018: 331). This concept therefore encourages an analytical shift away from evaluations of activism based on its effectiveness in making lasting societal changes in the public sphere or in terms of its potential to be scaled up. Rather, intimate activism is about practices that acquire significance as acts of care. This enables us to rethink impact more broadly as ethical engagement and avoid reducing it to simplistically quantifiable material results. While prefigurative politics situates impact in the public sphere and institutionalized forms, intimate activism finds political potential in the inter-subjective domains of care.

By combining these lenses, we develop the analytical framework of morally grounded activism. Like intimate activism, morally grounded activism accounts for the importance of ethical and moral commitment, relationships, and subjectivity. Yet it also takes seriously actors' commitment to making a material difference, regardless of how small this might be. In this sense, morally grounded activism shares common ground with prefigurative politics and its quest for societal transformation via actions that prefigure alternative ways of existing (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021). It allows us to see everyday actions as impactful for individuals even if they do not lead to wider social change, and simultaneously it allows our analysis to reside at the blurry interface between public and private spheres.

Methodology

We draw upon nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jade City in eastern China, complemented by in-depth interviews. Originally, our project's main focus was on zero-waste lifestyles in Jade City. During the initial phase of fieldwork, from November 2023 to January 2024, Katherine Wong attended in-person zero-waste talks, workshops, and farmers' markets, and conducted ten in-depth interviews with self-identified zero-waste advocates. Woodland was serendipitously brought to our attention during an interview with a founding member of a secondhand item exchange enterprise.

Following an initial visit to Woodland in January 2024, Wong volunteered at the store at least once every fortnight until fieldwork concluded in September 2024. In total, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with Woodland personnel, customers, and farmers within Woodland's supply network. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Yet our most valuable insights often emerged from casual conversations and informal interactions. Over the nine months, Wong visited the store twenty times, with each visit lasting between two and six hours. In addition to participant observation at Woodland and participation in various workshops, Wong actively engaged in the "reduce-plastic street" initiative led by Woodland founder Huang Xiaomei, which we discuss below. Throughout the article, interview quotes and fieldnotes are by Wong.

Li Qiu was initially involved in the study as a research participant and subsequently became a coauthor. In line with established qualitative research practice, this author did not analyze or interpret data relating to her own participation, but she participated in collective deliberation leading to conceptual development within the research team. This collaborative approach reflects an orientation toward the co-production of knowledge and the co-development of conceptual tools with research participants, while maintaining analytical

separation where necessary to preserve methodological rigor. Her anonymity as a participant is maintained in order to safeguard the anonymity of other research participants, which may otherwise be compromised.

While we initially entered the field interested in zero-waste living, we refrained from assuming what counts as zero-waste living or activism. Instead, our theoretical orientation toward individual aspirations and everyday practices emerged through our ethnographic encounters. In this vein, we have followed the inductive principle of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in developing the concept of morally grounded activism, as it was formulated in response to the primacy of moral concerns and subjective aspirations of research participants emerging from ethnographic encounters. Paying closer attention to these everyday acts is also a form of epistemic justice: the decision to focus on a broader spectrum of practices and engagements was part of our research design, but the decision to label it as activism emerged from how research participants saw and regarded their everyday actions. While our methodological decision to spotlight the in-between spaces of the private–public and state–society divides stems from our effort to rethink activism beyond dominant sociopolitical paradigms, it is equally shaped by and reflective of how research participants made sense of their everyday practices. The new conceptual tool of morally grounded activism is therefore the result of our grounded sensibilities toward our data and of our commitment to capturing, however partially, the irreducible complexity of our participants' lives, values, and hopes.

Our method of activist research—where we “affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle” (Hale, 2006)—presented challenges such as difficulties in maintaining analytical distance and navigating ethical ambiguities. Nonetheless, it enabled us to explore contentious processes and moral sentiments while producing critical research that fosters the imagination of “other-worlds” and alternative institutions (Osterweil, 2013; Hale, 2006). Building rapport and establishing trust with Woodland members, as well as neighbors, customers, and other local business owners facilitated explorations of more sensitive topics, including people's political opinions and their views on how to define and engage in environmentalism and activism more broadly.

This research focuses on the case study of Woodland, naturally positioning its founder, Huang Xiaomei, at the center of our analysis. A common critique of case study approaches, which investigate a single unit in great depth, is that their findings may not be generalizable to other contexts (Gerring, 2004). The growing prevalence of sustainable living trends across urban China (Lu, 2023; Zhan, 2024) suggests that the practices and challenges we observed at Woodland may resonate with, or offer insights into,

similar initiatives elsewhere. By adopting a focused ethnographic inquiry, we aim to illuminate the situated practices, ideas, and contradictions specific to Woodland, while also uncovering its connections to broader networks and global processes (Small, 2009) and using it as an entry point for conceptual and analytical innovation.

More importantly, our methodological choices must be understood within the specificity of the Chinese context, where heightened political sensitivity under Xi Jinping has posed significant challenges for accessing field sites and navigating trust and vulnerability (Harlan, 2019). Spending an extended amount of time at Woodland and becoming increasingly perceived as an “insider” helped us address these challenges. Moreover, in an era of heightened ideological conformity, responses to environmentalism outside official discourses are often rendered invisible in the media, while empirical studies of environmentalism under Xi are increasingly rare. We have deliberately cultivated this focused inquiry as an analytical tool to challenge the façade of seamless coherence presented by the empirical conditions of our research (Candea, 2007; see also Fu and Simmons, 2021). By drawing attention to alternative meanings that contest the homogenizing imagination of dominant discourses, we seek to open a generative ground for critical theory-building.

Everyday Environmentalism in Jade City: The Case of Woodland

Woodland was established in Jade City in 2021 by Huang Xiaomei, a white-collar professional and outspoken environmentalist in her midforties. It is situated in a modern residential neighborhood of Jade City, nestled alongside a long row of stores selling fresh produce. Woodland is a community store selling ecologically farmed produce, including rice, beans, dried fruits, yellow wine, and soya sauce. The interior of the store is arranged less like a merchandise display than a cozy pantry, with hand-drawn environmental posters and Chinese calligraphy banners stretching across the walls and shelves lined with reusable containers and stacked farmer produce. These products are directly sourced from a network of suppliers across China, and Huang only buys from farmers who farm organically on land that has been already farmed upon (i.e., not “virgin” land, which would be less ecologically sustainable). Moreover, in an inversion of traditional supply-chain dynamics, farmers set the price for their produce. According to Huang, Woodland’s prices, although expensive compared with non-ecologically farmed products, are reasonable because profit maximization is not her aim. The store’s clientele are mainly opportunistic customers and a small group of regular

customers who are vital in sustaining the store. Most are middle-class people living in the neighborhood, and many are mothers with young children.

Consistent with its primary goal of instilling ecological living practices in the local community, Woodland also organizes public events related to sustainable living. These events, which include a lecture series on ancient Chinese philosophy and its connection to sustainability, environmental film screenings, and guest talks, are held in a space at the back of the store. Woodland also maintains an active online presence through its public WeChat account, disseminating information about sustainable living and livestreaming events. More than a store, therefore, Woodland also functions as a community hub. Woodland sometimes engages in activities elsewhere in the city, including maintaining a stall at a monthly organic farmers' market in peri-urban Jade City and participating in flea markets organized by a local thrift store.

Throughout the fieldwork, Huang spent an average of several hours each day at Woodland. She also employed one full-time staff member, a recent university graduate in her midtwenties called Xixi, who worked there because of her interest in environmental issues. Xixi consciously adopts sustainable living practices in her everyday life. On her days off, she regularly participates in activities including reading groups, craft workshops, and litter-picking outings organized by the Jade City branch of GoZero Waste, a national platform with a presence in twenty-two cities that advocates zero-waste living. Woodland also employs several part-time workers and volunteers from Huang's personal network. In this way, Woodland is built upon and reliant on existing networks, even while creating additional networks is one of its main aims.

Huang has a longstanding relationship to China's environmental movement. She participated as a student volunteer in the late 1990s campaign to save the Tibetan antelope. Led by the seminal ENGO Friends of Nature, this campaign was an important milestone in the development of Chinese environmental advocacy. After embarking on her white-collar career, Huang developed a passion for environmentalism and subsequently established her own ENGO devoted to animal protection.

Huang founded Woodland shortly after moving to Jade City because she wanted to promote green living within the community and connect climate change to people's everyday lives. She launched the store during one of the most severe phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the city was under strict lockdown. The timing, she explained, was deliberate. For her, the pandemic functioned as a "pause button" in people's lives—an interruption that created space for ethical reflection on relationships with the self, with others, and with nature. Observing her surroundings at the

time, she noticed a growing public interest in practices of self-care rooted in traditional Chinese medicine, in household waste reduction, and in wildlife protection—concerns that were heightened by the debate over the pandemic’s origins. At the same time, the lockdown had brought about a natural decline in mainstream consumerism, which she saw as opening up spaces for alternative models to gain momentum. Taken together, these conditions convinced her that the moment was ripe for Woodland to take shape.

Huang’s decision to focus on Woodland was also influenced by growing state control over civil society in the Xi era. She explained the relationship between the state and ENGOs through a metaphor that compared the political environment to a plot of land in which ENGOs are rooted. In Huang’s telling, whereas the soil was relatively fertile in the 1990s and 2000s, allowing numerous and diverse ENGOs to emerge and take root, fertility had declined in recent years because of tightening state control. As a result, many ENGOs have struggled to survive, and some activists have departed from activism altogether (Zhu and Jun, 2022; O’Brien, 2023). For her part, Huang decided to leave the soil and search for an alternative “plot” in which to develop. She shifted focus from trying to influence the state through advocacy to concentrating on fostering environmental consciousness and changing individuals’ consumption patterns instead. According to Huang, while the state is pervasive, it struggles to influence decisions taken at the household level, including whether to pursue sustainable lifestyles. The decision to establish Woodland was therefore an example of adaptation in the face of growing state control (O’Brien, 2023). It represented a turning away from the state toward society, while maintaining that shaping individual behavior—partly in the expectation that this feeds into their interactions with others and projects moral obligations beyond the self—is a fundamental dimension of activism.

Below, we draw on ethnographic evidence and describe in detail how the social actors of Woodland, through a reflexive process of creative experimentation, articulate more sustainable futures that are radically at odds with the reality they find themselves in. As we show, concrete actions, often involving efforts to recast the material flows of everyday life, are best understood as forms of morally grounded activism because they blur the presumed boundaries between private and public spheres and they demand that scholars rethink assumptions about the *political* and *material* significance of everyday actions in light of their *moral* significance. Here we develop our analysis more fully by taking each of the three dimensions of prefiguration elaborated by Jeffrey and Dyson in turn and reflecting on how the concept of morally grounded activism can push our analysis further.

Improvisation

Improvisation is a common characteristic of prefigurative actions, according to Jeffrey and Dyson (2021), because they develop through trial and error without always following a clear blueprint for the future (see also Swain, 2019). Prefigurative actions are usually complex, messy, and context dependent, with activists constantly negotiating the boundaries between the status quo and the society they aim to create (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). This feature strongly resonates with our experience of Woodland's activities and its founder's vision for it. Huang explained that she wanted to expand Woodland from a neighborhood store to an ecological community 生态社区 that exerts influence beyond its immediate surroundings. This ambition however, as with any prefigurative practice, is characterized by uncertainty and improvisation.

In April 2024, at one of Woodland's weekly internal meetings, Huang and two of her employees reflected on the recent decline in business. They suspected that how the store was presented to its customers—as centered around reducing waste and wider environmental initiatives—was insufficiently appealing to mainstream customers primarily concerned with their own and their families' well-being. They debated whether to diverge from discourses aligned with their sustainable goals to others that could boost sales and ensure Woodland's survival amid China's economic downturn. As Xixi put it:

When talking to people, we need to think about what matters to them. For instance, when we're trying to encourage people to reduce their use of plastic, it might be more effective if we focus on its potentially harmful effect on health and the well-being of future generations instead of emphasizing its environmental impact, as some people may find this irrelevant.

Accepting that Woodland's survival was at stake, Huang agreed to tailor discourses toward themes such as self-care and health. With self-deprecating humor, she began to label herself a “businesswoman,” which she had previously considered incompatible with her environmental activist identity. Woodland actors' struggle to balance means–ends alignment and goal-oriented strategies illustrates the experimental and context-contingent nature of prefigurative actions as described by Jeffrey and Dyson (2021). By moving away from the assumption held by some scholars (e.g., Gordon, 2018) that prefigurative actions are guided by a predetermined goal, this perspective provides an analytical space for grasping how prefigurative actors are adjusting strategies, expectations, and goals in accordance with the social reality and even grappling with identities, as Huang did here.

The improvisation dimension of Woodland's prefigurative actions is best demonstrated in its "reduce-plastic street" 减塑街 initiative, which Huang saw as an important milestone in expanding Woodland's influence beyond the store. This illustrates how the significance of initiatives can move between scales, and how even highly local actions can embody underlying visions for a broader reach. The initiative aimed to mobilize neighboring stores to reduce plastic bag usage among customers. Huang visited these stores in person to enquire about business owners' willingness to participate, while offering onsite assistance during the initial implementation stage to help stores communicate with customers. Handmade cardboard signs with messages urging customers to reduce plastic bag usage were created for display within stores. For example, one read, "Please bring your own bags. Every plastic bag saved makes a difference," while another implored, "Let environmental protection be passed down from generation to generation 袋袋."³

Unsurprisingly, implementing "reduce-plastic street" was a process of trial and error characterized by uncertainty. While most business owners supported the initiative, as minimizing plastic bag usage would help them cut costs, customers lacked the incentive to forego free plastic bags. Hence, one of the biggest challenges concerned the unconventional nature of this quest, a common thread running through many studies of prefigurative politics (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 648). One afternoon during peak time at a neighborhood grocery store, Huang held aloft a sign and urged customers to use fewer plastic bags. Most customers reacted with indifference, and several expressed dismay. A young woman next to the cashier muttered, "If you are asking people to do this, shouldn't you also be responsible for providing plastic bag alternatives in-store?" Although the store owner welcomed Woodland's sign, she also voiced pessimism regarding the initiative's effectiveness and her own difficult position. She said, "People, especially older generations, are very stubborn. It's impossible to change them. When I tried to convince them to take fewer bags out of environmental concern, they accused me of being stingy." Resignedly, she explained that plastic bag theft is not uncommon. In this light, Huang's efforts urging people to reduce their plastic bag consumption exemplify what Jeffrey and Dyson (2021: 648) describe as "proleptic prefigurative politics," which "involves particularly audacious attempts to 'reach ahead' and sets up an especially stark contrast between prefiguration and the surrounding milieu."

This friction arising from her proleptic actions did not extinguish Huang's activism, and her perseverance is rooted in her ethical convictions in ways that can be best understood through the lens of morally grounded activism. Later that afternoon, she installed signs in four additional stores. In response to a question about her motivation and the problem of rejection, Huang

emphasized the importance of *action*, no matter how insignificant it might appear at first:

I believe what I'm doing is meaningful. *Doing* 做 is the most important. It is the best way to confront neglect and frustration. You must exist and act. Otherwise, that voice will be lost forever. For now, Woodland is just a single spark, but who knows, one day it might start a prairie fire.

This commitment to action, as reflected in Huang's environmental engagement, is precisely what Jeffrey and Dyson (2021: 646) argue: it "separates prefigurative politics from many other forms of oppositional politics which are concerned with acting *on* dominant powers rather than acting *out* social alternatives." For Huang, the value of "acting *out* social alternatives" is two-fold. Its foremost value is as a form of individualized "being" 存在 grounded in ethical obligation, but also as a strategic practice with the potential to generate material impact that transcends private–public boundaries. It is within this in-between space where the private and the public intersects that her moral action is situated. Later she optimistically said, "I believe that people's attitudes, even those who are most stubborn, can be impacted through our small acts, such as putting up reminder signs and words of persuasion." At Woodland, plastic bags are not offered, and most customers bring their own containers. Those without one are offered used containers or packaging, which almost everyone happily accepts. Although a seemingly small act, this shows that Huang's effort is not entirely futile. It also highlights the potential for morally grounded activism to challenge the too-often-taken-for-granted present while altering assumptions surrounding what is possible and yet to come.

Woodland's physical setup also contributes to establishing new systems of material flows. During our fieldwork Woodland moved to a bigger space across the street, and a new restaurant and branch of the store were established in the suburbs. During a visit to the restaurant and new store before its formal opening, Yuanzi, the manager and an active member of GoZeroWaste, explained her abiding "zero-waste" principle—that she would always prioritize reusing or recycling secondhand materials over purchasing new ones when setting up the site. She explained that most items in the store—from small decorations and household appliances to furniture and flooring materials—were either acquired from friends and family, secondhand markets, or collected from the street. With help from her carpenter father, she worked with whatever she could find. For instance, the display table area was created from a wooden door and old staircase handrails acquired at a secondhand market, and the trolleys were assembled

with old drawers from neighbors. Yuanzi described this as a process of “creative improvisation” 自由发挥.

Likewise, during Woodland’s relocation, Huang shared the same prefigurative struggle with Yuanzi. Surveying the shop floor covered with secondhand furniture and refurbishment materials, Huang drew attention to the low-grade tiles she had acquired from the factory, which would otherwise have been discarded. She explained: “For most people, these old objects 旧物 are simply waste 废物. By incorporating those into our store, we hope to give them a second life 重获新生.” By extending the life cycle of objects, both Huang and Yuanzi challenge the relationship between production and consumption underlying dominant economic processes to create a more ethical material flow. Their effort echoes, albeit at a micro scale, what David Schlosberg (2025: 92) describes as “sustainable materialist movements,” which, he contends, are “based in collective action, sustainable material practices, and prefigurative politics.” At the same time, by materializing ethical obligations through objects and things, they create a morally grounded space that is intimate and rooted in ethical commitment, rather than being entirely transformation-driven. The significance of these practices thus lies not only in their material impact, but also in how they render ethical obligation visible and tangible for all who enter and participate in this space.

While the material impact of these improvisational efforts should not be dismissed, it is certainly not their most significant effect. After all, the tangible outcomes of saving plastic bags or reducing waste are miniscule when measured against the scale of environmental pollution. Jeffrey and Dyson (2021: 649) argue that the importance of improvisation lies in its ability to challenge dominant discourses and “reinforce what is possible.” Building on this, we suggest that such experimental acts are forms of “ethical endurance” embodying the “potentiality of living otherwise” (Tironi, 2018: 442). From this perspective, their potential for impact also derives from the capacity to articulate a “type of imagination that unfolds in the horizon of a future that can always be different” (Tironi, 2018: 443). As forms of morally grounded activism, the practices of repurposing old objects and salvaging rejected tiles for the new store articulate an ethical commitment that becomes embodied in the very fabric of the store. In turn, this has the potential to affect and extend (or reaffirm) ethical obligations to those who enter this space. In other words, the significance of improvisational practices lies less in their ability to achieve measurable goals than in the creative energy they generate in the present—a generative force that opens space for alternative possibilities, however uncertain or fragile, and cultivates boundary-crossing social ties. We turn to this aspect next.

Institutionalization and the Development of an Ecological Collective

The second feature of prefigurative practices identified by Jeffrey and Dyson (2021) is “institutionalization.” This refers to how prefigurative practices can become more sustainable through the “thickening” of social practices via network building and organizing. Digital platforms play an increasingly important role in this (Fians, 2022). Conversely, failure to build social networks could result in the breakdown of activism. This feature is apparent in the wider social sphere facilitated by Woodland. While the previous section focused on the relatively individualized improvisation efforts by actors in articulating sustainable futures, this section explores some of the processes that give rise to these forms of sociality (see also Zhang, 2024). By tracing the processes of community building, compromise, and sociality that unfold amid the network of people and things connected to Woodland, it illustrates that morally grounded activism is not located only in the individual realm, but at the interface between the private and the public spheres. Its hybrid position, in turn, underscores the importance of challenging the public–private dualism that so often underpins dominant conceptualizations of environmental activism and the related assumptions that are often held about activism: that it only counts as activism if it is socially and politically impactful.

This definition of activism, which is also at the core of prefigurative politics, however, was developed in relation to liberal states, or to characterize radical forms of activism (such as the Arab Spring) that unfolded despite their authoritarian settings. It predetermines what counts as activism while implicitly assuming liberal democracies as the default context, rather than allowing participants to elaborate their own standards for measuring the impact and significance of activism as it evolves (see Hughes, 2020). Morally grounded activism, by contrast, recognizes that activism may involve different visions of what counts as meaningful and impactful. In our case study, for instance, the potential for participation in everyday environmentalism to nurture sociality and articulate ethical positions was crucial. This open-ended approach to defining activism is particularly important when it operates under an authoritarian state and needs to find ways to survive in infertile soil or to change “plots” (strategies) altogether, as Huang articulated through her soil metaphor, recounted in the previous subsection. But it is just as important beyond illiberal states, as a methodological and conceptual stance.

As the principal actor in Woodland, Huang’s agency and visions are vital to the forms of morally grounded activism articulated through Woodland. Yet, as Jeffrey and Dyson (2021: 649) aptly observe, central to much

prefigurative politics “is not the concentration on strident acts of individual distinctiveness” but “slowly widening circles of trust and inclusion through the process of consensus-building, compromise, and conviviality.” The evolution of Woodland from a store to the center of an emerging “ecological collective” (Zhang, 2024) highlights this. Here, we utilize Jeffrey and Dyson’s (2021: 649) definition of institutionalization as a “thickening of social practice” as opposed to the creation of official, named institutions. We also take their exploration further by investigating the less visible forms of institutionalization constitutive of social ties beyond organizations, which are encompassed more accurately by the term “morally grounded activism.”

This becomes evident in the “reduce-plastic street” initiative discussed above, which, far from epitomizing Huang’s individual agency, is an entanglement of multiple social agents, materials, and spaces. For instance, displaying signs in neighborhood stores not only requires consensus building with business owners but also involves them advising where signs can be most effectively positioned. The advantage of fostering alliances became more apparent when some store owners became advocates for the initiative, persuading customers by directing their attention to the display signs. During a follow-up visit to a local pharmacy, a worker observed a recent reduction in plastic bag usage after she started asking customers whether they needed bags and reminding customers that those bags would probably end up as trash.

Noticeably, forming social ties constitutes a critical part of Huang’s morally grounded activism. This is reflected in her constant effort to forge alliances with organizations and enterprises with similar visions and goals. In collaboration with Recircle—an online enterprise advocating circular living—an exchange point was set up inside the store where people could take or leave pre-owned goods. Huang has also worked closely with a local privately run zero-waste center specializing in recycling low-value waste packaging such as plastic bags, milk cartons, and takeaway boxes, thus handling waste that Jade City’s dominant recycling scheme fails to absorb. A collection point is stationed outside the store where residents are encouraged to deposit waste every Saturday, which Huang then transports to the center. Meanwhile, Huang develops personal connections with every farmer supplying produce for Woodland to certify that the produce is organic and thus complies with the store’s ethos.

Besides engagement with local organizations, Woodland has cultivated an online presence and uses digital communication to form social ties that traverse spatial and regional boundaries, creating an “imagined community” (Pottinger, 2017). Messages, videos, and articles promoting the store and sustainable lifestyles are regularly distributed via the Woodland WeChat account

and related groups, fostering online sociality while enrolling people and organizations outside the neighborhood. Digital platforms have also played a crucial role in building solidarity with farmers who supply organic produce to Woodland but who are often located in remote places. Livestreaming events where farmers share their stories and interact directly with clientele are broadcast via WeChat Live, giving farmers a voice. This forges collaborations that transcend the rural–urban divide, as well as new material relationships that are more just and sustainable and less exploitative than the dominant supplier chain.

A common critique of prefigurative politics is that, by focusing on creating internal solidarity, actors risk falling into a type of “social closure” and thus fail to establish networks outside their core (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 651). By contrast, Huang’s morally grounded activism is characterized by a continuous effort to form social ties that transcend not only spatial and regional boundaries of the physical store but also conventional strategies for increasing awareness of waste and affecting behavior. Besides running community engagement events under the theme of sustainable living, Woodland regularly holds art camps for young children. Huang explained her rationale for this:

Before, when I tried to speak to people directly about sustainable living, many would tell me they lacked the time and energy to pursue it. As for most families, the key concern nowadays lies with children, and specifically their education. By organizing education camps and sharing that concern, it opens doors for dialogue, exchange, and change.

In practice, this involves Huang subtly and opportunistically inserting sustainable practices into the material flows and interactions of everyday life. During a painting session, Huang asked the children to share a pot of paint thinner to minimize waste. When the art teacher insisted that everyone needed an individual container, Huang found some old plastic containers in the back of the store and started telling the children about the environmental impact of plastic. A mother who witnessed this interaction transformed a finished yoghurt into a dipping pot. Impressed, Huang drew everyone’s attention to the mother’s waste reduction effort and encouraged them to emulate her. Subsequent painting sessions witnessed an increase in the number of children who brought containers from home. This is only one example among many of Huang’s efforts to develop Woodland into an inclusive space by forming relationships outside its assumed core. Another example is the sporadic volunteers at the store, which include an eighty-year-old grandfather who takes care of the plants in front of the store voluntarily. He would bring in abandoned plants

left on the curb in return for cardboard at the waste collection point, which he would then sell. Through these intense social efforts, not to act *upon*, but to act *with* a wide range of actors found at different social locales, Woodland is transformed from being an individual project to an “ecological collective” (Zhang, 2024) situated in between the private and public spheres while further blurring the boundary in the process.

Morally grounded activism calls for a rethinking of the social and political relationships that underpin processes of institutionalization in nonliberal contexts. Extant studies of prefigurative politics in liberal contexts largely focus on horizontal social bonds emerging in civil spaces. By contrast, in an authoritarian context with close state surveillance, the formation of social networks is not only dependent upon actors’ ability to form horizontal ties but also on the formation of vertical ones with the state to gain political legitimacy. Huang understands the importance of gaining state recognition for public participation. A vignette recorded during fieldwork illustrates this point:

Upon arriving at the store, Huang greeted me enthusiastically with exciting news: officials from the Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB) visited the store yesterday to applaud Woodland’s contribution to promoting sustainable lifestyles while also expressing their full support for future projects, including the “reduce-plastic street” project. The visit was also reported on by a provincial state media outlet. Huang perceived this event as a milestone in Woodland’s development as she believes having recognition “from above” will undoubtedly open future doors.

While Huang often spoke critically of the system and its top-down policies, she adopted a pragmatic approach to engagement that was neither resigned nor retreated from these contexts. She positioned herself between the state and society through a poetic analogy of a bridge:

I am aware of the significant divide between the state and society. I neither deny this divide nor distance myself from it. Instead, we should delve deeply into this space in-between and take on the role of a bridge. Within this space, you will always find ways to take action. Many people might simply say, “I feel powerless and incapable, hence I will stay away.” But I believe what is at stake is the occupation of the middle ground and the determination to act within it.

While Rundong Ning and David Palmer’s (2024) conception of “micro-civil” society describes “a space of autonomy” in which actors bypass the state to pursue alternative moral codes, morally grounded activism envisions the possibility of acting *through* the state without acting *for* it. Huang, for instance, also holds alternative visions of the future, but rather than distancing herself from the state, she actively works with it. For her, entanglements

with the state are not a hindrance to activism, but a means of acquiring resources and support to advance her own goals. During a subsequent meeting with an officer from the local community (*shequ* 社区) office to request extending the current waste collection point at Woodland to free spaces in the community, Huang mentioned her meeting with the EPB.⁴ In response, the officer expressed full support for her request. As this case shows, rather than being confined to society, as prefigurative politics would have it, morally grounded activism operates through private and household domains but is simultaneously engaged with government provision/oversight. By engaging with this intersectional space where the relationship between the state and society becomes entangled, Huang's actions and discourses exemplify forms of morally grounded activism that are adapted to respond to a nonliberal context. Anna Tsing (2005: 5) reminds us of the capacity for frictional encounters to lead to new arrangements of power through the metaphor of the stick: "Rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick." In the final section, we will return to reflect further on the ethical significance of such "awkward . . . interconnections across difference" (Tsing, 2005: 4).

Impact and Ethical Significance

The third and last feature of prefigurative politics that Jeffrey and Dyson draw attention to is "impact." They outline four ways in which prefigurative politics can be considered impactful: "the up-scaling of initiative beyond an original site," the creation of "durable skills, knowledge, or resources," "triggering attitudinal change," and having "an affective importance" (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 652–53). While Woodland has yet to significantly up-scale its initiative, its impact is evident in the three other constitutive elements of this framework. For instance, struggles to advocate for sustainable consumption and zero-waste living both inside and outside the store have honed techniques of persuasion that can be tactically mobilized in future advocacy. Moreover, networks, partnerships, and alliances formed both within and outside Woodland's assumed core also constitute valuable resources for up-scaling efforts in the long term. In the context of the "reduce-plastic street" initiative, some store owners have noticed reduced plastic bag usage. When combined with customers bringing their own containers to Woodland, the potential to trigger attitudinal change is highlighted, even if this appears limited. The "reduce-plastic street" initiative also had an affective importance in the sense that, although largely met by resistance, it nevertheless created a "shared sense of purpose" (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 653) among several people, including store owners.

Despite the usefulness of the prefigurative politics framework in fleshing out the impact of activism, it falls short in recognizing the moral value of these interventions in two ways. First, while recognizing the everyday as a site of action, most studies of prefigurative politics are tied to a liberal notion of “the public” as “emergent groups of well-organized, outspoken and articulated individuals capable of mobilizing cognitive (and economic) resources in the face of an externality” (Tironi, 2018: 443). This perspective, as Tironi (2018: 443) goes on to argue, “perpetuates a fundamental demarcation. Between the social and the individual, the public and the private, the *polis* and the *oikos*.” Moreover, it occludes the moral significance of actions that are less visible to the public—those rooted in the subjective realm and intimate spaces of care—that both intimate activism and morally grounded activism are committed to. Relatedly, by relying solely on an etic definition of impact, the significance of actions for participants themselves is overlooked. In Tironi’s (2018: 447) account, for instance, while the cleaning of plants will not stop toxic pollution, these actions nevertheless “sustain the conditions of possibility of their lives.” The importance of attending to people’s own understanding of impact can also be seen in the following quote from Huang as she reflected on the importance of action in the face of neglect: “I believe that people’s attitudes, even those who are most stubborn, can be impacted through our small acts, such as putting up reminder signs and words of persuasion.”

For Huang, the value of her action not only derives from the present as a form of “being” and an embodiment of “acting out social alternatives” (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 646) but hinges on a future where actions have the moral potential to influence others, even if this is uncertain (Tironi, 2018). Hence, despite neglect and doubt, she perseveres. In this example, the significance of her action lies not only in its impact per se but in its enactment of moral commitment and ethical obligation, where Huang comes to embody an ethical other by showing that people are not completely resigned to their fate (see Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 2018; Tironi, 2018). This resonates with the “mundane yet purposeful doings” that Tironi (2018) describes as “hypo-interventions.” By decoupling impact from scale, visibility, and publicity, Tironi (2018: 447) invites us to reconsider the political dimensions of ordinary practices as they sustain the conditions of life and create interruptions, however modest, in the trajectory of environmental loss and decline.

At Woodland, such hypo-interventions are evident daily: from taking coffee grounds to make compost at home (see below), reusing discarded objects in creative ways, and buying organic products for the health of one’s family to caring for abandoned plants and cleaning milk cartons to recycle them—all these small actions and doings articulate care for significant others, human or

more-than-human, through which a space of ethical otherwise is opened (Tironi, 2018). To rethink impact through the concept of morally grounded activism is not to dismiss the value of the prefigurative politics framework or the potential for everyday actions to scale up, but rather to further dismantle the conceptual wall between everyday actions and politics. By bringing together the concepts of intimate activism and prefigurative politics, we seek to advance an understanding of impact that is not confined to the private or the public, the individual or the collective, but rather one that questions the usefulness of this divide in the first place.

Amy Zhang's (2024) conceptualization of a group of Guangzhou residents' project to brew and utilize eco-enzymes as a form of "ethical doing" offers a way of understanding impact that is neither entirely private and intimate nor overtly contentious and public. For Zhang (2024: 144), the efficacy of the eco-enzyme project lies in "mundane acts of monitoring and repairing ecologies," which gradually extend outward, producing "an energy and fervor that prompts brewers to gather . . . in acts of experimental speculation." While the daily practices at Woodland may seem even more mundane than pouring eco-enzymes into the river (which the brewers of eco-enzymes do to cleanse it), they nonetheless carry a similar capacity to reconstitute social relations in ways that remain open-ended and to articulate concerns that span across individual, family, community, and planetary spheres.

For example, Lanjie, a 62-year-old local resident, visits Woodland weekly. Her concern for food quality began when her husband's health started deteriorating a few years earlier. In her search for ways to improve his well-being, she became increasingly attentive to their diet, prioritizing organic food. This quest led her to Woodland, which soon became her primary shopping destination. Likewise, many other customers, particularly mothers, were initially drawn to Woodland by a desire to cultivate a healthier lifestyle for themselves and their families in a context where food safety has become an everyday concern. Here, the seemingly individualistic act of consumption is deeply rooted in care. Its significance lies not only in the articulation of care for family members but also in how such acts can expand in scope. As shared by many others, Lanjie's initial motivation was to care for her husband, yet through her weekly visits to the store this concern gradually developed into a broader commitment to care for the environment.

As Lanjie reflected, "Before, I had never even thought about the impact of plastic on our planet. Woodland and Huang have taught me so much. Now, I no longer use plastic bags when grocery shopping and always try to bring my own." As with other sustainable practices at Woodland, the significance of reducing plastic use lies less in its direct capacity to counter pollution than in its social efficacy as emerging through collective acts of "experimental

speculation” (Zhang, 2024: 144) that gesture toward a future both uncertain and unknowable (Tironi, 2018: 442). Understood as a form of morally grounded activism, Lanjie’s decision to engage with Woodland and extend what she learned from this engagement to other spheres of her life simultaneously articulates her ethical commitments to her family’s health and to planetary health.

Beyond these individual practices, the spatiality of Woodland and its embedding within the neighborhood plays a crucial role in fostering sociality and generating material impacts at the local level. Located next door to a café, Huang has set up a recycling station at the store’s front, where the café can dispose of its coffee grounds and residents can then come and collect it to use as compost at home. Together with upcycling and sustainable consumption promoted inside the store, plants rescued on the curbside, the life cycle of objects altered by the Recircle freecycling station, and the recycling of low-value waste at the zero-waste collection point, they constitute an emerging collective of material systems that is more sustainable, transparent, and ethical than the dominant socio-technical system (Schlosberg, 2025). Woodland’s small initiatives destabilize mainstream, taken-for-granted systems and “radiate out” (Harms, 2022) an alternative vision of how communities might live more sustainably (Tironi, 2018).

By connecting these practices and forms of sociality through the concept of morally grounded activism, we argue that the political significance of the ecological collective lies less in its material outcomes than in its social effervescence or “an energy and fervor” (Zhang, 2024: 144) generated through social ties. From this perspective, the political is not reducible to measurable impacts but resides equally in the social ties and encounters these practices bring into being. Even awkward or conflictual interactions—such as those between Huang and customers who challenged her agenda—can be politically generative, becoming “key to emergent sources of fear and hope” (Tsing, 2005: 11).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has argued that new analytical frameworks are required to understand the emergent forms of activism that persist amid tightening political control in Xi Jinping’s China. The prevalent focus on the state across studies of Chinese environmental activism has greatly enriched the field. However, it overlooks the diverse moral aspirations and ethical commitments that are quietly reshaping China’s political and moral landscape and risks narrowing scholars’ possibilities for making alternatives visible. Moving beyond the state–society dichotomy has enabled us to present a

more nuanced and complex picture of activism in China and its evolution in response to growing political control. Through its conceptual and empirical contribution, this article invites further engagement with questions concerning how to theorize activism, the public–private divide, and individual agency in contemporary China and other restrictive contexts. It also suggests, in line with Sarah Hughes’s (2020) call for examining resistance in “emergence,” that the concept of morally grounded activism can serve as an analytical tool beyond China—one that would nurture more attention to what matters to activists themselves.

Combining the capacity of prefigurative politics to recognize the transcending power of everyday actions with intimate activism’s commitment to ethics, relationships, and subjectivity, our original concept of morally grounded activism foregrounds the ethical potential for seemingly mundane practices to channel and affect individual aspirations while simultaneously highlighting their capacity to exert impact beyond the limited material effects of using one fewer plastic bag or recycling one more piece of waste. Morally grounded activism focuses on ethical obligations that in turn produce a shared sociality and connect with more conventional or recognized forms of participation in the state’s ecological vision of sustainability. Rather than viewing seemingly mundane everyday actions as forms of depoliticization or ways of allowing the state to scapegoat individuals as responsible for environmental stewardship, morally grounded activism highlights a different type of politics, one that does not view engagement with the state as the (only) response to environmental crisis. In highlighting the political significance of actions alongside other types of significance, it allows for greater attention to agency and subjectivities and blurs the boundaries separating public from private, collective from individual, and state from society.

Departing from a state-centric approach does not mean we completely sideline the state, however. Instead, we have sought to reposition the state and focus on it insofar as it matters to individual actors in our analysis. Morally grounded activism does not foreclose the possibility of engagement with the state to further activist goals. As shown from her interactions with local EPB officers, Huang welcomes collaboration with state actors in pursuit of her aims. Conversely, prefigurative actions in China can quickly bump up against political red lines. Creating alternative structures based on participatory democracy, for example, is politically off limits. And if prefigurative actions are to be upscaled, actors must work *with* the state, even when the issues (such as green living) are relatively nonsensitive. However, we have argued that the main locus of the social change for our research participants is embedded within networks of individuals rather than being oriented toward or “embedded” within (Ho, 2007) the state, or indeed the public sphere. Woodland’s

prefigurative vision of sustainable living “radiates out” (Harms, 2022) through the networks it creates and maintains, and it materially inhabits the neighborhood through its visible presence with cardboard signs and freecycling and recycling stations. The actors involved in Woodland aspire to change people’s behavior, one individual at a time. Every attitude changed, or every plastic bag saved, represents a small victory that makes persisting worthwhile. And yet persistence is worthwhile even without achieving tangible results. It is based on a moral imperative to act and an ethical commitment to sustainability, no matter how incommensurate these actions may seem with the scale of the environmental crisis. As such, Woodland conforms more closely to the self-organization rooted in familial relationships documented by Hsu (2025), in which “individuals in China see themselves as influencing a web of social relations that extends outward from themselves and their families to encompass the larger community and the rest of the world.”

While morally grounded activism shares common ground with Tironi’s “intimate activism,” there are also important differences. Intimate activism was developed in relation to disempowered individuals in toxic environments who lacked recourse to alternative forms of political action (Tironi, 2018). Moreover, Tironi and colleagues specifically reject any connection between intimate activism and prefigurative politics (Liboiron, Tironi, and Calvillo, 2018). In contrast, our findings are based on a relatively privileged urban milieu mainly comprising university-educated middle-class individuals. Like intimate activism, morally grounded activism can partly be seen as a form of ethical endurance. But it also highlights the aspiration-driven nature of green living advocacy in an urban middle-class context.

Morally grounded activism may adopt different guises in different socioeconomic settings. It is potentially significant, for instance, that participants in research on relatively poor, rural communities exposed to high levels of pollution in China voiced resignation and displayed efforts to *live with* pollution (Lora-Wainwright, 2021) or to ignore it (Lou, 2022)—still ethical endurance, but of a different kind. Although our research participants in Jade City are wealthier and less exposed to pollution than those examined in these other works, we would caution against drawing simplistic conclusions that correlate aspirations with the middle classes and resignation with poverty. Future studies could explore these aspects further. We recommend that future studies not explicitly focus on aspirations in relation to wealthier communities and on powerlessness in relation to poorer ones, but adopt an inductive research design as we have done here. This would allow scholars to grasp what significance research participants themselves give to their mundane yet purposeful actions, rather than imposing researchers’ assumptions. Attending more closely to the intersection between class, subjectivity, and agency

would further illuminate the diversity, limitations, and transformative potential of morally grounded activism in China.

This article has also highlighted the heterogeneity of responses to the changing political climate in Xi's China. While Kevin O'Brien (2023) has shown how Chinese activists are increasingly signaling loyalty and forging closer ties to officials, we have demonstrated that adaptation can also encompass elements of withdrawal alongside alternative modes of action, engagement, and sociality. Although in no way a direct threat to CCP hegemony, turning away from the state indicates new possibilities for activism, albeit at a small scale. While we lack systematic data, media reports and insights gleaned from fieldwork suggest sustainable living initiatives are gaining traction among some sections of society (see, e.g., Xinhua, 2023). Rather than comprising a singular green public sphere as was observed during the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao era (Yang and Calhoun, 2007), it might be more helpful to conceptualize this trend in terms of multiple “micro-civil” spheres focused inward on ethical living rather than public debate (Palmer, 2019).

In closing, we wish to reiterate that, while this article speaks to the contemporary Chinese context, we hope it can generate debate among social scientists interested in activism more broadly, much as the concept of “rightful resistance” has done (O'Brien and Li, 2006). Indeed, while the concept of morally grounded activism emerged from one particular context in contemporary China, the conceptual provocation is more far-reaching. We invite all scholars of activism, in China and beyond, to attend to subtle forms of agency and how they articulate subjectivities and moral concerns, wherever they emerge.

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Notes

1. We use the term “the state” throughout this article, while acknowledging the significant overlap between the CCP and the state apparatus in the Chinese context.
2. In addition to Woodland, pseudonyms are used for the names of all individuals and places discussed in this article.
3. This is a clever play on words in Chinese that creates a pun connecting the idea of using sustainable bags with the broader responsibility of sustainability for future generations.
4. A “shequ” is a neighborhood-based unit that serves as a fundamental organizational and administrative structure in urban China.

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