

# China's Overseas Investments and its Responsibility for Environmental Preservation: Perceptions of a Diverse Range of Actors with a Focus on Egypt

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**Abstract:** China's responsibility for environmental preservation has become a major debate worldwide, but the literature lacks discussions on the perspectives of people for whom China's investment may cause environmental problems. This article aims to answer the question: How do Egypt's diverse range of actors represent their views on China's responsibility for environmental preservation? To assess the nature of people's perspectives, this article uses universalism and particularism as opposing concepts and tries to categorize people's perspectives along the continuum between the two. Based on 39 semi-structured interviews, this article finds that the majority of the Egyptians demonstrate their universalist tendency in their assessment of China's action on environmental preservation. However, amongst the universalists, the views about China's responsibility diverge depending on whether they focus on China's environmentally oriented projects or on an unintended environmental consequence of China's infrastructure investment, which is detached from environmental consciousness. On one hand, with regard to China's behavior in investments in Egypt, approximately four-fifths of the interviewees view China as responsible due to its effective policies to preserve the environment. They have emphasized that environmental preservation must be favored over any aspect of economic development. On the other hand, regarding China's indirect engagement with environmental preservation, around three-fourths of the interviewees view China as irresponsible for funding and investing in GERD's construction, given that this dam has significant negative impacts on environmental aspects in Egypt. They consider China as prioritizing economic benefit over environmental concerns. This may affect China's reputation as a responsible great power, not because it is confined to China, but because of it, China is regarded as irresponsible.

**Keywords:** *China, responsibility, Egypt, local perspectives, environmental preservation*

## 1. Introduction

Debate on China's role in international society as a responsible great power has been contentious and attracted great attention among scholars in the field of international relations. Some argue that there is a need for China's further engagement with the challenges that face today's world and insist that China must be a responsible stakeholder (Etzioni 2011; Nye 2015; Deng 2014). In relation to environmental preservation, China's responsibility is put into question and is considered as one of the most controversial and hotly debated issues worldwide. Literature abounds with the

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perspectives of great powers, including the US, the European Union, India, and Japan, towards China's responsibilities. However, it lacks discussions on the local perceptions of the middle and small-sized countries. It overlooks the importance of assessing responsibility from a content-specific perspective rather than applying ordinarily general assessments, which would apply everywhere without modification. Thus, the central question for this article is: *How do Egypt's diverse range of actors represent their views on China's responsibility for environmental preservation?*

Since the announcement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), many countries have been joining the initiative, which has led to an increase in China's investments outside its territories. Within the BRI framework, China is building roads, ports, railways, and other forms of infrastructure. Although the initiative is helping millions to get out of poverty by offering job opportunities for local people and contributing to the economies of the host countries (Xie et al. 2023), concerns and allegations are increasing when it comes to its negative impacts on the environment (Sattar et al. 2022).

Beijing has characterized the BRI as a beneficial opportunity for all the countries involved. It is noticeable that many countries in the Middle East take the BRI seriously as part of their development strategy since they include it in their national strategic planning. For example, Saudi Arabia aligned the BRI with its "Saudi Vision 2030" (Chen et al. 2018). Iran considers its collaboration with China within the BRI as an alternative plan for its sanctions-torn economy and a way to improve its infrastructure (Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2020; Tehran Times 2020).

Among the Middle Eastern countries, Egypt has shown a keen interest in the BRI in terms of infrastructure development; in particular, it has become an important element in the development of the Suez Canal Corridor, as China has become the primary investor in this Egyptian national project (Xinhua 2019). Egypt's Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCZone) integrates with the BRI to interconnect and boost global trade (Belt and Road News 2019).

Egypt is selected as one of the best cases to explore the perspectives of the people in host countries on China's responsibility for environmental preservation. On the one hand, Egypt has strong economic and political ties with China, which may suggest that people view China as responsible. On the other hand, harming the environment and causing pollution to water and air, which may affect people's lives directly or indirectly, may suggest that Egyptians would view China as irresponsible, especially in its rapid and wide economic expansion. Thus, the case of Egypt offers a key to understanding the contradiction between considering China as responsible and irresponsible at the same time. In other words, it helps one understand the complexity and the contradiction behind perceiving the concept of China's responsibility.

Egypt and China's relationship has been on a high level of mutual cooperation for decades. On the political level, their relations have been strengthened since President Mursi was in office from 2012 to 2013, as he paid great attention to China and chose it as his first country to visit outside the Middle Eastern region (SCMP 2012). After President Abdelfatah Elsisi came to office in 2014, he visited China in December of the same year. Since his visit to China, China-Egypt relations have been elevated from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership (China Daily 2016). On the economic level, the bilateral trade between Egypt and China reached \$14.5 billion in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic despite the pandemic's negative implications on the global economy and China has become Egypt's largest trading partner (Calabrese 2021). Moreover, Egypt received Chinese investments for its major domestic projects, including the "Suez Canal Economic Corridor" and the "Central Business District" of Egypt's new administrative capital (Interesse 2022). As for financial assistance from China to Egypt, the China Development Bank (CDB) provided loans of US\$1.4 billion to Egyptian financial institutions in 2016, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) provided a loan of \$210 million to help construct renewable

energy projects. Egypt has also witnessed various investments from more than 140 Chinese enterprises in the fields of industry, construction, and services (Interesse 2022).

This article will be divided into four main sections. First, it reviews the literature, it will review the literature on China's responsibility for environmental preservation and the environmental problems in Egypt. Then, it will shed light on the gap in the literature which is the lack of discussions on local perspectives on China's responsibilities. Next, it discusses the analytical framework of this research by examining the debate between universalism and particularism aiming to locate people's perceptions on environmental preservation. The next section will introduce the research method which is semi-structured interviews. The last section will empirically analyze the views of the people collected through semi-structured interviews by applying a content analysis approach to assess China's responsibility.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature contains predominantly western-based interpretations of the concept of international responsibility itself (Breslin 2010; Etzioni 2011; Kung 2004; Slim 2016; Jones et al. 2009; Dunne and Teitt 2015; Zheng 2018) and there are also some studies that include the exploration of its roots in China's academia (Loke 2016; Mao 2017). There is no consensus on the definition of the term; however, most studies view the concept from the great powers' point of view. Moreover, there are a great number of works on the perspectives of great powers including the US, the European Union, India, and Japan towards China's responsibilities, especially those related to environmental preservation. Most of those great powers see a potential for China to cooperate more on this issue by considering the competitive element between China and countries such as the US and India.

In addition, there are several studies that deal with perceptions on European countries, USA, and others. Those studies have discussed how local people and governments criticized these traditional powers for various reasons, such as their imperialistic approach, including state-building, promoting democracy, and so on (Dalacoura 2005; Debartolo 2022; Markakis 2012; Kohli 2020). However, when it comes to China, most of the literature focuses on concerns raised by China's increasing influence and perceived negative impact on local situations (Tiboris 2019; Goh 2016; Kastner 2016). Thus, the discussions become more about China vs. the West and other great powers, and not much attention is paid to China vs. the local perceptions of the people on the ground, compared to traditional powers vs local perceptions. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond this sort of literature that centers on the great powers' relations.

The literature also contains many discussions on China's responsibility for environmental preservation, including domestic policies inside China and the effectiveness of its international role and collaboration within various international agreements such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) and others. China has improved its environmental policies in accordance with its domestic fears and international pressure. On the domestic level, Ma and Ortolano (2000) argue that there are several issues related to the coordination and implementation of environmental policies within China's environmental management structure. Moreover, the establishment of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) in 2018 is considered as a good initiative to centralize the government environmental policies which were scattered within several bodies such as the Ministry of Water Resources, the State Oceanic Administration, and the National Development and the Reform Commission (Lewis 2023). Meanwhile, on the international level, Dong (2020) argues that China's participation in international negotiations on climate change has increased since the Paris

Agreement and that it has become more recognized as a promoter of this agreement since then.

To conclude, most of the previous studies discuss China's international responsibility from the great powers' point of view, focusing on China's rise through the lens of competition and considering it as a threat to their interests and position within the current international system. However, the literature does not pay much attention to the local perceptions of the middle and small-sized countries regarding China's responsibility, especially in the Middle East region. There is also a low awareness of the need to explore local perceptions and to know why understanding China's responsibility is important.

This article aims to grasp the local perceptions of the Egyptian community, ranging from governmental organizations to businesses, to civil society and academics, on how they perceive China's responsibility. Furthermore, it will try to unveil the potential factors behind these perceptions. By doing so, it attempts to define China's responsibility from a Middle Eastern perspective by considering the importance of the local context. In other words, it contributes to the importance of assessing responsibility from a content-specific perspective, rather than applying ordinarily general assessments which would apply everywhere without modification. Thus, analyzing local perceptions will contribute to the broader discussion on China's responsibilities and contribute to China studies on its conceptualization.

### **3. Analytical Framework**

The aim of this section is to build an analytical framework that appraises the ways in which interviewees conceptualize their understanding of environmental preservation when they consider China's responsibility. The framework discusses environmental preservation and its applicability within the debate between universalism and particularism.

#### **(1) Universalism and Environmental Preservation**

Universalism is the concept in which ideas and practices have universal applicability anywhere without modification (Luthans and Doh 2012). It is a concept which raises an important question: Can all humans everywhere share the same morals, values and ethics? It also embraces the idea that all human beings are equal by nature, and moreover, that there are certain aspects of culture that can be universally observed.

In universalist cultures, societies cannot operate without laws, shared values, and rules. Once the rules have been determined to be beneficial, all members of society must respect them without any exception. In this regard, society is constructed based on rules and these rules are non-negotiable. In addition, members are obliged to adhere to contracts while penalties occur for not following their articles.

Environmental preservation is considered to have universal applicability, given that it is shared by all humankind. Therefore, various international organizations settle rules and agreements to preserve it for the well-being of all humanity. Thus, it must be protected by rules and has a universal application without modifications because it touches millions of lives around the globe. This is the case even when environmental preservation hampers some short-term economic development.

Thus, the United Nations as the international organization with the highest number of member states and its treaties is usually endorsed by a large part of these states, in addition to being the preferred forum for discussing any action that is considered to have a global scope, has been giving special attention to environmental preservation through its organs by international agreements, treaties and conventions. These include "the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

(UNFCCC),” “the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD),” and in addition “the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR),” which offers some important perspectives on environmental preservation through ethical values that should be included in universalism discourse.

Among the UN's initiatives to maintain peace and prosperity for all of humanity as well as for the planet, the “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were introduced in 2015 and now comprise a total of 17 goals. The SDGs have been adopted by 193 countries since their establishment which has legitimized them with the sense of universality that makes them obligatory for member states and the civil society concerned. Although all the 17 SDGs are mutually interconnected, there are some which relate specifically to environmental preservation such as: Clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), Affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), Climate action (SDG 13), Life below water (SDG 14) and Life on land (SDG 15).

## **(2) Particularism and Environmental Preservation**

Particularism is the concept in which circumstances, relationships, or contexts determine how ideas and practices should be applied (Luthans and Doh 2012). Particularism is an exclusive devotion to one's affiliation and interests. It suggests that circumstances, relationships, and contexts determine ideas and practices. It also suggests that behavior depends on a specific given situation (Smith et al. 1996).

Particularist cultures tend to foster relationships over rules. In this case, if rules are applied, they may not be respected and will depend on circumstances and people's relationships. Particularism may not abide by the rules per se, but rather the application thereof. In this case, if rules exist, they will be treated as a loose set of guidelines while people are mostly obliged to foster relationships instead.

Particularists argue that in some developing countries, economic development may be favored over environmental preservation. They also argue that reaching a good and appropriate level of environmental preservation requires appropriate economic development beforehand, even if the environment suffers to some extent. The majority of proponents of particularism are market liberals who argue that economic growth, including production and consumption, creates higher incomes, which in turn generates the funds and political will to improve environmental conditions. According to market liberals, the main drivers of environmental degradation are poverty and lack of economic growth. In poor societies, for people to survive, they need to eat, build homes and improve their life conditions and in this process, they may exploit the natural resources around them (Clapp and Dauvergne 2005).

## **(3) Universalism-particularism Debate: Operationalization**

The universalism and particularism debate is over the extent to which environmental preservation should be prioritized over the needs of a society, including economic development, and this is the debate that this article uses as its analytical framework. On the one hand, universalists insist that environmental preservation is indispensable and universal, so it must be applied everywhere without any preferences or exceptions. On the other hand, particularists insist that domestic, economic, and national aspects should be considered when discussing any environmental aspect. Thus, the discussion between universalists and particularists on environmental preservation is contentious.

This research uses this debate as a framework to analyze the Egyptian views of China's

responsibility because, as mentioned above, how Egyptians consider the relationship between environmental preservation and economic growth is expected to be reflected in their views on China as well.

In analyzing interview transcripts against this framework, the table below indicates some typical comments that epitomize universalist and particularist comments. The universalism column shows some elements that universalists prioritize over economic development, while the particularism column shows some elements that particularists prioritize over environmental preservation.

Universalism	Particularism
Reducing pollutants in air, water, and soil	Less transparency and monitoring of negative impacts on air, water and soil
Proper waste management and rehabilitating degraded environments	Less attention and care towards waste disposal measures
Protecting the variety of species and ecosystems and advancing clean energy transition	Accepting financial compensation for some environmental damage
Considering future generations and their rights to natural resources	Overlooking depletion of natural resources to prioritize rapid economic benefit
Advancing UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)	Favoring short-term gains over long-term sustainability

In Egypt Vision 2030, the government aims to maintain a balance between economic development and environmental preservation. For economic development, the state seeks to achieve high and sustainable economic growth and include the environmental dimension in the economic development process. On the environmental level, the government seeks to confront the effects of climate change, rely on renewable energy, reduce gas emissions and rationalize the use of the natural resources (Egypt Vision 2030). Although environmental preservation and economic development are set on the same level of priority, the actual implementation on the ground may differ. Moreover, while analyzing people's views on an individual level, environmental preservation may be prioritized over economic development or vice versa.

## 4. Research Method

### (1) Content Analysis Approach

The research method used for this article utilizes a qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews. The analysis is conducted based on a content analysis approach. This article aims to analyze not only how a diverse range of actors represent their views on China's responsibility for environmental preservation but also to try to find on what basis they represent their views.

This kind of interview is used by asking open-ended questions to the interviewees aiming to understand their thoughts and knowledge through free interaction and free expressions. Furthermore, it aims to unveil the potential factors behind their views. While conducting the interviews, open-ended questions helped in having an in-depth exploration of the interviewees' experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. It also encouraged them to express their opinions and feelings

towards China's responsibility by using their own expressions and words, which provided rich insights into how they represent them and the potential factors behind them. One more reason for choosing the qualitative approach is that responsibility is a context-dependent concept and culturally influenced. Also, its application can be shaped by various factors including cultural, religious, political and others.

The questions used for the interviewees are as follows:

1. What do you think about China in terms of the environment?
2. How do you consider China's responsibility for environmental preservation, including the water and the air ...etc.?
3. Have you heard about GERD? How do you consider China's role in GERD's construction?

For people in the "Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area" located in Suez city in Egypt (Hereinafter referred to as TEDA-Suez):

1. How do you deal with waste management?
2. What measurements are taken to reduce air pollution?
3. How do you advance clean energy?

## **(2) Selection Criteria for Interviewees**

This article targeted a diverse range of actors in Egypt, a total of 39 individuals who were divided into six categories. When choosing the interviewees, diversity was prioritized in each category to ensure their impartiality as well as the diversification of their tendencies, including political proponents, economic beneficiaries, and environmental advocates.

Here is a brief summary of the targeted interviewees and some background information about them. Some interviewees preferred not to disclose their positions and affiliations. 1) Eleven academics were selected from different disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, environmental studies and business management. Some of them belong to public educational institutions and others belong to private ones, 2) Six journalists were selected including columnists, press correspondents, and feature writers so as to ensure the variety of experiences, 3) Six governmental officials were selected from bureaucrats to public servants and military personnel, all of whom had managerial positions. Those governmental officials belong to the Ministry of International Cooperation, the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Electricity and Energy, and the Ministry of Irrigation, 4) Eight representatives of non-governmental organizations were selected ranging from human rights organizations to environmental advocacy groups and social movements as deemed relevant to the topic of this research, 5) Three officers from different diplomatic communities were selected including the embassies of Belgium in Egypt and the Delegation of the European Union to Egypt. These were selected as representatives for the Western companies who have investments in Egypt, and 6) Five individuals from one of the Chinese investment sites in Egypt: TEDA-Suez economic zone, including onsite project managers, engineers and workers.

The interviews were conducted partly online in early 2022 due to restrictions on mobility amid the COVID-19 pandemic and continued in Egypt from August to September 2022 after restrictions were eased. Online interviews were conducted using Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and regular phone calls. For both online and face-to-face interviews, the interviewees were given the same open-ended questions, and they were given enough time to answer without interruption. Moreover, confidentiality was ensured so that they could speak comfortably. Recording was also done only with permission. Among the face-to-face interviewees, 25 individuals were

interviewed including 5 academics, 4 journalists, 4 governmental officials, 5 representatives of non-governmental organizations, 2 officers from different diplomatic communities and 5 individuals from TEDA-Suez economic zone.

The findings of this article have to be seen in light of three limitations. First, there is a methodological limitation of using semi-structured interviews. This limitation lies in conducting qualitative analysis rather than quantitative analysis. The quantitative statistical survey may provide a more comprehensive method to answer the research question; however, this article has chosen the qualitative one because it aims to examine the nuances in interviewees' thinking to be able to identify the potential considerations behind their views. The second limitation lies in the criteria for choosing the interviewees. The interviewees in this article have a tertiary level education. Interviewing people with different levels of education may have provided more comprehensive results on how people view China; however, it was designed to collect a diverse range of actors so as not to be biased by a specific group. Moreover, the interviewees are in their 40s and 50s. I have chosen this age to ensure that they have enough experience in their own field. Among the interviewees, there are 30 males and 9 females. Although they are predominantly males, this partly reflects the social structure of the Egyptian society in the sense that most managerial positions in Egypt are occupied by males. However, it is one of the research limitations. In future research, a greater number of females need to be consulted. The third limitation can be the timeframe of the research. People were interviewed for this article in 2022 as a sample, aiming to grasp a general understanding of how people represent their views on China's responsibilities. Thus, further research is needed to address these limitations to give a more comprehensive understanding and enrich the scholarship on this topic.

## 5. Empirical Analysis

This section begins by analyzing how a diverse range of actors represent their views about China's responsibility for environmental preservation based on the universalism-particularism debate. This is followed by a discussion of what leads to such views. Through the interviews, people represented their views about China's responsibility for environmental preservation in two ways. First, the environment as a direct issue; and in this regard, China's environmental preservation behavior in Chinese projects in Egypt has been discussed. Second, the environment as an indirect issue and in this regard, China's engagement in GERD and its negative impacts on various environmental aspects in Egypt have been discussed.

### **(1) Environment as a Direct Issue in China's Responsibility (China's environmental preservation in its investments in Egypt)**

The reason for discussing the environment as a direct issue to assess China's responsibility for environmental preservation is that some of the Chinese investments in Egypt are manufacturing and industrial companies which are directly related to various environmental aspects such as water, air, resources, and soil. This suggests that there is a possibility of air pollution, water pollution, natural resources depletion and other environmental damage, all of which need careful attention and action. Thus, it is necessary to discuss environmental preservation policies in China's investments in Egypt to understand to what extent China is bearing responsibility for environmental preservation in host countries.

In relation to the topic of China's environmental preservation in its investments in Egypt, the comments made by 34 interviewees, including 10 out of 11 academics, 5 out of 6 journalists, 6



out of 6 governmental officials, 5 out of 8 non-governmental organizations' representatives, 3 of 3 members of diplomatic communities and 5 out of 5 individuals from TEDA-Suez zone suggest that those actors view China as responsible with different nuances in their answers that suggest various considerations.

Moreover, the interviewees represented their views about environmental preservation in the way of universalistic ideas which suggest that preserving the environment has a universal application that includes relying on renewable resources, proper waste management and advancing the clean energy transition. They have emphasized that environmental preservation must be favored over economic development even if the economic development takes longer time. Preserving the environment must be prioritized over any aspect of economic development including infrastructure, manufacturing and the usage of natural resources. The remaining interviewees did not give information or views about China's responsibility for environmental preservation in its investments in Egypt.

When talking about China's practices to preserve the environment in its investments in Egypt, most of the conversations revolved around the positive role that China plays in preserving the environment in Egypt. For example, a governmental official at the Ministry of International Cooperation mentioned<sup>1</sup> that most of the projects in which China invests in Egypt, focus on clean and renewable energy including 11 projects to generate electricity using solar energy across the country.

This matches with what an official at the Egyptian Ministry of Environment stated<sup>2</sup> about China's cooperation with Egypt in the field of green fuel production and potassium chloride production. He mentioned: "During the third Belt and Road forum in China, the Suez Canal Economic Zone officials have signed two agreements with two Chinese companies; 'China Energy' to produce green fuel, and 'United Energy Company' to establish a complex to produce potassium chloride, in which both are powered by renewable energy plants. These investments are worth about \$14.75 billion." Moreover, according to a representative from the Ministry of Electricity and Energy<sup>3</sup>: "China donated equipment to Egypt, including solar street lighting poles, a home solar energy generation system, LED bulbs and tubes, and energy-saving air conditioners, which contributes to enhancing our capabilities in combating climate change and fulfilling our international obligations." She added that, "China is very active in helping Egypt to address its international commitments within the framework of the Paris Agreement and contributing efforts to reduce carbon emissions by advancing clean energy transition." Their views suggest that a green energy approach is necessary to preserve the environment by reducing harmful emissions and China is enabling Egypt to address global environmental concerns.

From the above-mentioned answers, it seems that perceiving China as responsible in relation to environmental preservation is dependent on specific conditions such as equipment donation, helping Egypt to fulfill its international obligations, enabling Egypt to address global environmental concerns and signing agreements for investments with China. Thus, although these actors view China as responsible, their perception has been shaped by meeting specific conditions from the Chinese side.

While interviewing representatives from the civil society organizations<sup>4</sup> that work on the environmental preservation in Egypt, one stated that the Chinese projects do not negatively affect

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1 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 14, 2022.

2 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 15, 2022.

3 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 15, 2022.

4 Interviews, online via Zoom, March 24, 26 and 28, 2022.

the environment in Egypt as other European companies affect it, such as the Alexandria Portland Cement Production Company, owned by the multinational company Titan Cement Group, against which many lawsuits are filed from the locals residing around the factory in the Wadi El-Qamar area in western Alexandria. She added that many residents in this region are suffering from lung-related diseases due to the huge emissions of cement dust and coal residues. Another environmental activist mentioned<sup>5</sup> about the water pollution caused by the oil refining company British Petroleum. He mentioned that the company has been dumping oil residues into the Red Sea water which threatens the rare coral reefs underwater.

From the above-mentioned answers, it shows that some of the interviewees did not give concrete direct answers regarding China's responsibility for environmental preservation in Egypt, but rather they built their perceptions about China for being responsible not by discussing actual Chinese behavior, but by comparing it to other countries projects such as Titan cement group and British Petroleum.

By looking at what most of the interviewees mentioned about China's environmental policies to preserve the environment in Egypt, despite their views being universalistic about environmental preservation, we can observe that some of them are in agreement with and supportive of the current political regime and its policies towards China in terms of economic cooperation. This suggests that the national economic benefit element which the Egyptian government receives from China may act as an indirect factor that helps in shaping their views towards China. Thus, political endorsement and economic benefit are most likely to shape people's views on China's direct engagement in environmental preservation in Egypt and it was viewed as shouldering its responsibility for addressing them.

### **1) TEDA-Suez as an Example of China's Responsibility for a Direct Environmental Issue**

To further investigate the views of local people on China's behavior and responsibility for environmental preservation in Egypt, this article included views of individuals working at one of the largest Chinese investment projects in Egypt, which is "TEDA-Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone" and interviewed individuals there, ranging from onsite project managers to engineers and administrative staff.

"China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone" is an economic and trade cooperation zone certified by the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC with the aim of enhancing the capacity of cooperation between China and Egypt. The zone is financed by "Tianjin TEDA Investment Holding Co., Ltd" and China-Africa Development Fund and it was established at the Suez Canal corridor of Egypt in the northwest economic zone of Gulf of Suez (Hu, n.d.) The zone hosts several enterprises and manufacturing companies. Among these enterprises, four main Chinese enterprises operating in the zone are considered to be the main pillars of the zone's business: 1) Chinese fiberglass manufacturer Jushi, 2) Feed machinery manufacturer Muyang, 3) Petroleum and drilling machines manufacturer Sichuan Honghua, 4) High voltage equipment manufacturer XD-China.

The interviewees onsite have shown a proper understanding of the importance of environmental preservation, and they have the know-how to deal with issues that occur on the ground to reduce potential harm that may affect the soil and air. Some of them have received training in China on green strategies including manufacturing and energy production.

One of the onsite managers<sup>6</sup> from Jushi company in the Suez Canal Economic Zone said that

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5 Interviews, online via Facebook Messenger, March 13, 2022.

6 Interviews, face-to-face, TEDA-Suez Economic Zone, Suez City, September 7, 2022.

China is working side by side with the Egyptian government to preserve the environment in various ways, including proper disposal of solid and hazardous waste in manufacturing places so that it does not harm the surrounding environment and does not affect the health of the workers as well. He also added that regular maintenance of factory chimneys is being conducted by experts who inspect them, clean them, and change the air filters as needed.

In terms of the progress of work on sites, a specialized engineer<sup>7</sup> from the Environment and Quality Department of the zone said: “The manufacturing area in the Zone is periodically subjected to ‘Inspection and Environmental Compliance’ conducted by the Egyptian Ministry of Environment.” He added: “The Chinese side cooperates with the Egyptian authorities in this regard by ensuring that the production process is complying with its rules and regulations. The Chinese side also transfers its expertise in environmental protection to the Egyptian workers through regular training courses in Egypt and sometimes in China.”

From the above-mentioned answers, perceiving China as responsible or irresponsible is determined by the level of cooperation from the local counterpart. Given that any foreign investment requires a local counterpart who must be obliged to perform specific tasks within its local mandates and jurisdictions. Thus, the level of proper implementation of local law and regulations from the local counterpart seems to be necessary in perceiving China's responsibility.

Moreover, a production engineer<sup>8</sup> at Jushi Fiberglass Manufacturing Company explained that the company applies four important principles in preserving the environment and conserving energy: 1) green operation, 2) green manufacturing, 3) green products and 4) green synergy. Firstly, green operation means operating businesses in an environmentally based manner by closing down outdated production facilities, raising the efficiency of energy utilization, and abiding by standards for pollutant emissions by improving the emission reduction systems. Secondly, green manufacturing means, building denitration systems to reduce NOx emissions, processing water through the sedimentation and sewage treatment system and generally aiming for green manufacturing throughout the life cycle including source reduction, process control and end treatment. Thirdly, green products mean using new energy technologies and intelligent control technological equipment that have zero emissions and using industrial waste resources as raw materials to produce materials. Fourthly, green synergy means implementing the green procurement of raw materials by giving priority to products that produce low carbon emissions and cause a lower degree of damage to the environment, and adopting a green sales model by utilizing online marketing to reduce the carbon released by the business travel of clients and sales personnel.

By looking at the onsite views of individuals working at TEDA-Suez, it seems from their views that economic benefit may be the main factor behind their views of China as responsible in its behavior towards environmental preservation. However, it cannot be denied that these Chinese investments seem to be taking approaches to preserve the environment in terms of enhancing clean energy and decreasing the harmful emissions that may impact the air, water and soil.

## **(2) Environment as an Indirect Issue in China's Responsibility (GERD impacts) (China's engagement in GERD and its impacts on the environmental life in Egypt)**

The reason for discussing the environment as an indirect issue to assess China's responsibility for environmental preservation is that some actions taken by China in other areas may cause environmental problems in Egypt in an indirect way. In other words, certain actions by China may

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7 Interviews, face-to-face, TEDA-Suez Economic Zone, Suez City, September 8, 2022.

8 Interviews, face-to-face, TEDA-Suez Economic Zone, Suez City, September 7, 2022.

lead to unintended consequences that may have negative impacts on the environment, which is, in the case of this research, China's investment in GERD construction. GERD — despite being an issue of conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia — is considered an environmental issue in Egypt now, given its negative impacts on the environment. Moreover, China's responsible role can be put into question when there are unintended consequences for its engagement in a transnational issue like GERD.

### **1) What is GERD?**

GERD is a gravity dam that has been under construction by Ethiopia on the Blue Nile River since 2011 and is located in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region of Ethiopia. Egypt announced that the construction of GERD is illegal and illegitimate based on an Anglo-Egyptian treaty, signed between Egypt and Great Britain in 1929 that prevents any country from constructing dams on the Blue Nile or its tributaries, aiming to minimize any kind of interference in the flow of the Nile water (Piliero 2021). However, Ethiopia does not recognize this treaty, claiming that it was not party to it. Egypt understands the vitality of the dam to the Ethiopian people; however, the main concerns lie in the threat that the dam will cause to Egypt's water security and environmental damage (Roussi 2019).

### **2) Root Cause of Conflict**

The root cause of this conflict is that the construction of the dam is considered a threat to Egypt's water security. The dam is being constructed on the Blue Nile — a major tributary of the Nile River — and is located in the northern Ethiopia highlands, from where around 85% of the Nile's waters flow. The Nile River is absolutely essential for the vitality of Egypt where a population of about 107 million people depends on the waters of the Nile River in various aspects of life including its drinking water, agriculture, fishing, and electricity generation (BBC 2023). In the same vein, the Nile River waters are used also to fill Lake Nasser, a reservoir on the Nile River, in Upper Egypt. It was created by the impounding of the Nile's waters by the Aswan High Dam, which was built in the 1960s and dedicated in 1971 (Britannica, 1998). From Ethiopia's perspective, the construction of GERD is deemed necessary for the Ethiopian people and Ethiopia aims to produce electricity for around 60% of its population who suffer from power shortages. Moreover, it aims to provide businesses with a stable power supply to further boost and enhance its economic development (BBC 2023).

### **3) China's Engagement in GERD's Construction**

China has been contributing to the construction of the GERD in various ways. The role played by China's state-owned companies and banks is significant in constructing the dam and without exaggeration, the dam could not have been built without China's financial support. In 2013, China provided Ethiopia with a \$1.2 billion in a form of a loan to build transmission lines to connect the dam with the surrounding local towns which was conducted by State Grid of China Electric Power Equipment and Technology Co. (SGCC) (Clynch 2023; Xinhua 2017). Moreover, China provided Ethiopia with \$652 million in the form of loans in 2017, and Chinese enterprises also conducted a huge amount of construction work on the dam (Piliero 2021). Later, in 2019, China provided around \$1.8 billion to advance GERD-related renewable energy infrastructure. To advance the development of the dam, Chinese state-owned enterprises and multinational companies such as the China International Water and Electricity Corporation, Voith Hydro Shanghai, Sinohydro and Gezhouba Group have received contracts for the construction of the dam (Clynch 2023). In financing the dam, China has overlooked the negative consequences of the GERD on the downstream countries. When dealing with transborder rivers such as the Nile River, it is important to consider the possible

environmental impacts, not only on the domestic level but also on an international level with the riparian states.

#### **4) People's Perceptions**

In relation to the topic of China's role in the GERD conflict, the comments made by a total of 27 interviewees, including 9 out of 11 academics, 4 out of 6 journalists, 6 out of 6 governmental officials, 5 out of 8 non-governmental organizations' representatives and 3 of 3 members of diplomatic communities suggest that those actors view China as irresponsible by considering home and international situations. They represented their views about environmental preservation in the way of universalistic ideas which suggest that preserving the environment has a universal application, including ensuring the availability of sufficient water, maintaining climate change, and preserving life below water and life on land as practices that must be protected without modifications. The remaining interviewees did not relate the GERD issue to China's responsibility due to lack of knowledge about China's engagement in GERD's construction.

Regarding my open-ended question, "How do you consider China's responsibility for environmental preservation, including water and air?" they interpreted it as talking about China's role in the GERD conflict. This suggests that many Egyptian people are worried about Egypt's quota of the Nile's water under the current dispute about GERD and the Chinese stance in supporting the construction of the dam in this dispute. Those who mentioned the GERD conflict, emphasized the negative role taken by China in the GERD conflict for three reasons. First, it is financing the dam without any consideration for its negative impacts on the riparian states. Second, it is prioritizing its national interests over its responsibility as a great power. Third, it is unwilling to take a mediating role in resolving this conflict.

Regarding financing the GERD, a governmental official at the Ministry of International Cooperation<sup>9</sup> pointed out the negative environmental impacts of the project on the Nile River basin countries, especially Sudan and Egypt. He also pointed out that Chinese investments to support the construction of the dam may fuel wars in the region by saying:

The Nile River is an essential axis for the lives of the Egyptians. It is indispensable as a source for drinking, agriculture and fishing and any attempt to compromise the security of its waters may ignite a fierce war in the region between the Nile basin countries. China should reconsider its financial assistance for the dam's construction to avoid escalation in the dispute or any possible wars.

In this vein, Egypt has been persuading major international financiers including the World Bank, African Development Bank and European Investment Bank to stop financing Ethiopia for building dams on the Nile River, considering the negative implications for such dams (Swain 2011), but China has worked as an alternative to these international financiers, and the Chinese banks provided funds to the Ethiopian government for purchasing the turbines and the electrical instrumentation for the hydroelectric plants of the dam (Mbaku 2020).

Moreover, an academic<sup>10</sup> pointed out that there are studies about the possibility of the dam collapsing and the negative consequences that would have on the Aswan High Dam in Egypt and environmental life in general, and that China's role in its continuous support to complete the construction and filling of the dam is as an irresponsible action given the possible negative

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9 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 14, 2022.

10 Interviews, face-to-face, Alexandria, August 28, 2022.

consequences. Moreover, when a governmental official at the Egyptian Ministry of Irrigation<sup>11</sup> was interviewed, he indicated that the filling of the new dam basin lake would affect the agricultural and environmental life in Egypt because the diversion of the flow will lower the water level in Lake Nasser, and therefore electricity production will be affected and the amount of water that feeds Egyptian lands will decrease, which will negatively affect farmers, crops production, and drinking water supply.

Second, regarding China's national interest and its international responsibility as a great power, one of the journalists<sup>12</sup> mentioned that China prioritizes its national interests over its responsibility. He mentioned:

The economic benefit for China comes first. Despite China's rise on the international stage and its leadership for the developing world, economic benefit is its most important concern, as it advances its national interests in many ways in most countries located along the BRI. It invests in North Africa, including Egypt with a specific concern to the development of the Suez Canal corridor. It also invests in Ethiopia, which represents a pivotal country in the Horn of Africa, and GERD is one of China's most important projects in Africa, as important as it is to Ethiopia itself.

His comment shows the importance of the GERD for the economic benefit of China in Ethiopia and other African countries as well.

The importance of the dam relates to China's increasing presence in the Horn of Africa. Its national interests in Ethiopia are far bigger than those in Egypt. This is because Ethiopia has also been the gateway for China to construct its military base in Djibouti and further its presence in Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Thus, Ethiopia is the country which is vital for China to advance the connectivity of the BRI within the African Horn and East Africa (Şiddiq 2021). Moreover, the electricity that will be produced from the GERD will be utilized in the railways that will be constructed to connect Djibouti with Ethiopia.

Third, in relation to the mediating role that can be played by China in the GERD conflict, one of the journalists<sup>13</sup> pointed out that China's international responsibility lies in playing a mediating role in resolving international disputes, including political and environmental issues, and its failure and unwillingness to play a mediating role in resolving an existing dispute makes it an irresponsible power. He added that the United States had played a mediation role between the three countries involved in this crisis, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia and called on all parties to sit at the negotiating table to discuss ways to resolve the crisis, but China does not show any intention to mediate in this dispute. In the same vein, an environmental activist<sup>14</sup> has pointed out that China has a huge number of dams within its territory and has a long experience in dam management. It also has the most advanced technology that enables it to provide solutions for distributing water shares to each country, which will help Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan to obtain their water rights.

On the contrary, the US has played a mediating role in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The Trump administration called for a fifth ministerial meeting between the three countries, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia in November 2019 to reach an agreement to fill the dam; however, Ethiopia did not attend the meeting, and it was held only between Egypt and Sudan with the US

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11 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 16, 2022.

12 Interviews, face-to-face, Tanta, September 10, 2022.

13 Interviews, face-to-face, Cairo, August 20, 2022.

14 Online Interviews, phone calls, March 24, 26 and 28, 2022.

Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin. By mediating between the conflicting parties, the Trump administration demanded that Ethiopia ensures the final testing, and any kind of filling of the dam must not be done without an agreement. It has also emphasized the need to conduct all of the safety measurements based on international standards before the filling process (Maru 2020).

In the case of GERD, the tendency of Egypt's local actors towards a universalist approach is not driven by prioritizing economic development at the expense of environmental preservation but rather criticizing China for being irresponsible by not calculating the negative consequences of investing in GERD. Consequently, Egyptians consider any harm to Egypt's share of the Nile River's water as massive harm to various environmental aspects in Egypt. Thus, the Egyptians support a universalist approach that Nile River Waters must be protected under any circumstances and China is not advancing universal standards by investing in GERD and overlooking its negative consequences on Egypt. This may affect China's reputation as a great responsible power and make the local actors — Egypt in this research — view China as an irresponsible state as it prioritizes its national interests and economic benefits over environmental issues.

Moreover, from the above-mentioned answers, it seems that home and international situations greatly influence people's answers and their perceptions towards China for being irresponsible. Fears of threats to water security on a national level and fears of an escalation of the conflict with Ethiopia on an international level, have influenced people's perceptions towards China's responsibility.

Furthermore, the focus of this research is environmental preservation in Egypt and China's responsibility to protect it. From the interviews, one can recognize that local actors are not considering GERD as an issue related to the sovereignty of Ethiopia or an issue in Sino-Ethiopian relations only but viewing it as an issue related directly to various environmental aspects in Egypt because Egypt is sharing the Nile river's water with Ethiopia. Also, given that this research is a perceptions-based one, the finding that people blame GERD for causing a negative environmental impact on Egypt, emphasizes that it is not only a political conflict issue but also a domestic issue that affects Egyptians' lives and its animals, trees and crops as well.

Below is a summary of the empirical analysis section:

	<b>China's environmental preservation in its investments in Egypt</b>	<b>China's engagement in GERD and its impacts on the environmental life in Egypt</b>
By utilizing universalism-particularism framework		
<b>Egyptian actors' tendency toward environmental preservation</b>	Universalist tendency (Environmental preservation must be prioritized over economic development)	Universalist tendency (Nile River waters must be protected as a priority over any economic benefit to China, because this may put China's responsible role into question)
<b>Reasons for their tendency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relying on renewable resources</li> <li>- Proper waste management</li> <li>- Advancing clean energy transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensuring the availability of sufficient water</li> <li>- Confronting climate change</li> <li>- Preserving life below water and life on land</li> </ul>

<b>Egyptian views on China's actions</b>	China is advancing universal values and standards to preserve the environment in its investment projects in Egypt	China is not advancing universal values and standards for protecting the Nile River and shows less care about the negative consequences of the GERD on the environmental life in Egypt
<b>Assessment on China</b>	Responsible	Irresponsible
<b>By analyzing the outcomes of the content analysis of the views (Author's interpretations)</b>		
<b>Potential factors behind Egyptian views</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National economic benefit from China</li> <li>- Political endorsement of Egypt's current regime</li> <li>- China is helping Egypt to fulfill its international obligations</li> <li>- China is abiding by local standards and regulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fears of threats to water security</li> <li>- Fears about the negative impacts of the GERD on the Nile river's waters</li> <li>- Fears about the escalation of conflict with Ethiopia on the international level</li> </ul>

## 6. Conclusion

This article has discussed how a diverse range of actors from the Egyptian community represent their views on China's responsibility for environmental preservation. It aims to answer the research question: How do Egypt's diverse range of actors represent their views on China's responsibility for environmental preservation?

By utilizing the debate between universalism and particularism, it finds that the majority of Egyptians tend to represent their views similarly to the universalist perspective on environmental preservation, but views about China's responsibility diverge depending on whether they focus on China's environmentally oriented projects, or on the unintended environmental consequences of China's infrastructure investment, which appears to lack consideration for environmental consciousness.

On one hand, regarding China's direct engagement with environmental preservation in Egypt, around four-fifths of the interviewees view China as responsible due to its positive approach to preserving the environment by investing in renewable resources, having a proper waste management strategy, and advancing clean energy transition. They have emphasized that environmental preservation must be favored over economic development even if the economic development takes time to be achieved. Preserving the environment must be prioritized over any aspect of economic development, such as infrastructure, manufacturing, and the usage of natural resources.

On the other hand, regarding China's indirect engagement with environmental preservation, around three-fourths of the interviewees view China as irresponsible for funding and investing in GERD's construction, given that this dam has significant negative impacts on various environmental aspects in Egypt, including fishing, soil and drinking water supply. Those local actors are not considering GERD as an issue related to the sovereignty of Ethiopia or an issue discussed in the Sino-Ethiopian discourse only, but they view it as an issue related directly to various environmental aspects in Egypt because Egypt is sharing the Nile River's water with Ethiopia. Moreover, the finding that people consider GERD as causing negative environmental impacts to Egypt, emphasizes that it is not only a political conflict issue, but also a domestic issue that affects Egyptians' lives and its animals, trees and crops as well.



The content analysis approach utilized in this research reveals some potential factors behind people's perceptions. On the one hand, Egyptians' views on China as being responsible can be seen through three potential factors: 1) being responsible by meeting specific conditions such as donating equipment, gaining economy from China, helping Egypt to fulfill its international obligations, abiding by local standards and regulations, 2) being responsible if compared to other countries' behaviors, and 3) being responsible by considering a good level of cooperation from local counterparts. On the other hand, their views on China as being irresponsible can be seen through two potential factors: 1) fears from threats to Egypt's water security on the national level at home and 2) fears about the escalation of conflict with Ethiopia on the international level.

Furthermore, this article finds that in China's direct engagement in environmental issues, it takes responsibility for its environmental preservation policies; however, China fails to pay sufficient attention to non-business elements, such as the transnational impact of GERD construction on neighboring countries, such as Egypt, and environmental impacts that this business causes beyond national territories. This lack of attention may lead to compounded and consequential problems. This might happen due to China's lack of skills in addressing these kinds of problems or its lack of conflict sensitivity, which may lead to negative unintended consequences. This may affect China's reputation negatively as a responsible great power. However, it is worth mentioning that this problem is not confined to China alone as it may relate to other countries as well. In other words, this research does not aim to single out China as the only country to be blamed for the lack of attention to these issues as this may apply to other countries; however, this research goes deeper into the relationship between these kinds of compounded and consequential problems and perceptions on China's responsibilities. Thus, the reason for raising these compounded and consequential problems in relation to China is that because of them, China is regarded as irresponsible.

This article emphasizes the importance of content-specific assessment rather than applying ordinarily general assessments to the concept of responsibility. It also contributes to the literature on China's implementation of the BRI from an environmental perspective. Unlike the literature on China's BRI which mostly discusses the negative impacts of the BRI projects on the environment based on Western powers' perspectives, it offers local perceptions of a middle-power country such as Egypt on how the projects are implemented on the ground and its environmental considerations.

The analytical framework used in this research has surprisingly shown the universalist approach of the local actors in Egypt because it is based on individual views on a specific theme which is environmental preservation. However, when applied to the theme of human rights, both a universalist approach and a particularist approach have been shown when discussing China's responsibility for human rights protection (Tadrous 2023). For future research, this analytical framework may be used to analyze different themes where combined approaches can be found.

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