

УДК 378.4

DOI 10.18413/2949-267X-2023-2-4-4

## A case study on the participation of China youth organizations in global governance

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**Abstract.** In the face of increasingly complex global issues, social organizations are playing a more prominent role in the global governance system, with young people taking on a more important role. However, from a broader perspective, the current lack of overall capacity of China's youth to participate in global governance limits the process of China's participation in global governance. Taking the example of the China Youth Climate Action Network, a widely influential youth organization founded in 2007, which led the first team of youth delegates in China's history to appear on stage at the Copenhagen Climate Conference, this paper presents a case study focusing on the background, objectives and operational mechanism of China Youth Climate Action Network, explores the main features and ways of China Youth Climate Action Network's participation in global governance in the field of climate change, and makes suggestions on how to promote better participation of Chinese youth organizations in global governance in light of the existing major problems. This paper concludes that Chinese youth social organizations have made brilliant achievements in their participation in global governance, but are still somewhat immature compared to mature youth social organizations in other developed countries. Further changes are needed in both the government and the organization itself to support the participation of Chinese youth organizations in global governance.

**Keywords:** Global governance, International organizations, Youth organizations, China Youth Climate Action Network, Global climate governance, Environmental protection

**For citation:** Li, Menglong, Bai, Yajing and Cai, Xingyu (2023), A case study on the participation of China youth organizations in global governance, *Research results in social work*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 194–201. DOI: 10.18413/2949-267X-2023-2-4-4

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## Тематическое исследование участия молодежных организаций Китая в глобальном управлении

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**Аннотация.** Перед лицом все более сложных глобальных проблем общественные организации играют все более заметную роль в системе глобального управления, причем молодежь играет все более важную роль. Однако, с более широкой точки зрения, нынешнее отсутствие у молодежи Китая общей способности участвовать в глобальном управлении ограничивает процесс участия Китая в глобальном управлении. На примере Китайской молодежной сети действий по борьбе с изменением климата (CYCAN), широко влиятельной молодежной организации, основанной в 2007 году и возглавившей первую в истории Китая команду молодежных делегатов, выступивших на сцене Копенгагенской конференции по климату, в этом документе представлено тематическое исследование, посвященное предпосылкам, целям и оперативному механизму CYCAN. Исследованы основные особенности и способы участия CYCAN в глобальном управлении в области изменения климата, вносятся предложения о том, как способствовать более активному участию китайских молодежных организаций в глобальном управлении в свете существующих серьезных проблем. В этой статье делается вывод о том, что китайские молодежные общественные организации добились блестящих достижений в своем участии в глобальном управлении, но все еще несколько незрелы по сравнению со зрелыми молодежными общественными организациями в

других развитых странах. Необходимы дальнейшие изменения как в правительстве, так и в самой организации, чтобы поддержать участие китайских молодежных организаций в глобальном управлении.

**Ключевые слова:** глобальное управление, международные организации, молодежные организации, китайские молодежные сети действий по борьбе с изменением климата, глобальное управление климатом, охрана окружающей среды

**Для цитирования:** Ли, М. Тематическое исследование участия молодежных организаций Китая в глобальном управлении / М. Ли, Я. Бай, С. Цай // Научные результаты в социальной работе. – 2023. – Т. 4, № 2. – С. 194–201. DOI: 10.18413/2949-267X-2023-2-4-4

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## **Introduction**

Globalization has led to interdependence between countries and complex global issues that cannot be managed by individual nations. As an active participant in the construction of the global governance system, China is playing an increasingly important role in the international arena as it continues its efforts to promote the system of global governance fairer and more equitable [Zhang, 2016].

UN Secretary-General Guterres stressed at the COP 26 UN Climate Change Conference that “the climate action army – led by young people – is unstoppable. They are larger. They are louder” [Qv, 2021]. Youth have become a solid force in areas such as tackling climate action, advancing social justice and gender equality, and safeguarding human rights, and are increasingly engaged in global governance processes. As a generation full of vitality, plasticity and creativity, and even more so as future builders and leaders of global governance, the interest and active participation of youth groups in global governance is not only conducive to immediate policy action but also has far-reaching strategic implications for solving global problems. However, Chinese youth participation in global governance faces two dilemmas: from the internal perspective, youth have little awareness, weak capacity and absence of channels to participate in global governance; from the external perspective, youth participation in global governance lacks a supportive social environment, and the linkage between government, universities and enterprises is not strong [According, 2021]. From a comprehensive perspective, the current lack of overall capacity of China's youth to participate in global governance and the prevalence of the view in the international community that Chinese youth are incapable of leading global governance are not commensurate with China's current international status, which also restricts and affects the process of China's participation in global governance [International Education, [http](#)].

Youth organizations are a type or part of social organizations and are an important way for young people to participate in global governance. In terms of composition, youth organizations are social organizations voluntarily formed by young people with common aspirations to achieve common goals, and they generally have certain rules, a relatively clear hierarchy, and an integrated distribution of tasks. Culturally and functionally, youth organizations are oriented towards youth groups and committed to youth affairs as a criterion, believing that young people, with a more advanced education, are more likely to be committed to building a world with new social ideals and thus a new social culture [Yang, 2015].

However, due to the late start and limited level of internationalization of Chinese social organizations, their small number and low influence, they are still in the early stage of development. Chinese youth organizations have a weak foundation and lack relevant experience in international exchanges and services, and have neither social credibility nor sufficient independence and autonomy in setting the agenda for professional issues [Moe, 2013]. Therefore, instead of focusing on comprehensive youth organizations with a wide range of audiences and complex areas, it is more practical to focus on professional and specialized youth organizations that are based on a certain sector or a specific group of people or that focus on a certain type of activity.

Take the China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN), a youth organization founded in 2007, as an example. In 2009, the organization led the first youth delegate team in China's history to appear on stage at the Copenhagen Climate Conference and immediately drew international attention [Zheng, 2020]. As a prominent Chinese youth organization in the field of climate governance, it has played an active and important role in setting the global climate change agenda, influencing values and public opinion, strengthening education, and building local youth climate networks.

Therefore, taking CYCAN as a typical case, this paper wants to explore the background of its establishment, its purpose, its operation mechanism, and the main features and ways of CYCAN's participation in global governance in the field of climate, and puts forward suggestions to promote Chinese youth organisations to better participate in global governance in view of the main problems they have.

### **Literature review**

Currently, there is a limited number of studies in Chinese academia regarding the involvement of youth social organizations in global governance. For instance, Guo Yuankai and Zhou Ji analysed the way youth organisations participate in global governance by examining the World Assembly of Youth and the European Youth Forum. They outlined the effects and roles of such organizations, whilst emphasising the problems of legitimacy, independence, and distribution of powers and responsibilities of hub youth organisations in the participation process. They also distilled experiences from hub youth organisations [According to Guo and Zhou, 2021]. Liu Kai and Zhou Yuxiang examined a range of American youth organisations, including the Model United Nations and the U.S. Peace Corps. They contended that these organisations are government-led, prioritise the exportation of American culture, foster young talent and establish a global network for cooperation. The authors also assessed the potential learning experiences these organisations provide for Chinese youth [According to Liu and Zhou, 2021]. Using the Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales(AIESEC) as a case study, Li Jie outlines the characteristics, modes, challenges and experiences of professional youth organisations' involvement in global governance [Li, 2020]. Drawing on the International Union of Socialist Youth (IUSY), Zhang Huijie provides an overview of the main features of political youth organisations' participation in global governance and the related experiences [Zhang, 2020]. In conclusion, scholars have discovered that youth organizations have the capacity to unite young people who are interested in global governance and offer them a chance to communicate and practice. They can also spread the concept of global governance during their activities and broaden the international perspective of young people, motivating them to participate in international affairs. For instance, the World Assembly of Youth has co-organized several major events with other organisations, which have significantly increased youth participation in global affairs [According to Guo and Zhou, 2020]. Concerning the subjects of global governance, involving youth social organisations in global governance would expand the range of subjects and promote the rationalisation of international order. Compared to sovereign states, youth social organisations possess distinct advantages in contributing to global governance. This can offset the shortcomings of sovereign states and promote diversity among global governance subjects [According to Yan and Yang, 2017]. Nevertheless, youth organisations' involvement in global governance faces challenges such as economic problems, problems of independence, problems of legitimacy and problems of efficiency of project implementation.

The aforementioned case studies primarily concentrate on organisations established in foreign countries while research on organisations within the domestic sphere is limited. Hence, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of CYCAN to examine its operational mechanism, challenges, and developmental experience. This will provide valuable insight for Chinese youth organisations interested in contributing to global governance.

## **Method**

This research utilizes a case study methodology to conduct a comprehensive investigation of CYCAN, a youth organization. To ensure thorough data collection, several sources were incorporated, such as the official website, WeChat account, pertinent media reports and related literature papers.

(1) The official website for the organization, [www.cycan.org](http://www.cycan.org), supplied detailed insights into CYCAN's mission, vision, projects, and activities. The annual reports of the organisation can likewise be found on the official website, which provides information regarding the organisation's structure, project management, financial status, and other details.

(2) CYCAN's WeChat account, CYCANER, reveals its significant influence and appeal within youth groups. It also offers a wealth of information regarding CYCAN's projects, news, and background information.

(3) Our comprehensive understanding of CYCAN is further enriched by the numerous independent and objective media reports that we have collected. Proper citations of sources will be provided in this article.

(4) We have analysed academic papers cited within this text, offering detailed information on CYCAN's establishment, history, programme implementation, as well as challenges and responses faced.

## **Background, Objectives and Operation Mechanism of CYCAN**

Founded in August 2007, CYCAN is China's first non-profit environmental organization focused on promoting youth responses to climate change. It focuses on four areas: advocacy, practical action, international exchange and green employment, and is committed to promoting young people's understanding, awareness and active participation in the process of addressing climate change, and providing a platform and opportunity for aspiring youth to lead green change [Zheng, 2018].

### **(1) Background and Development Goals of CYCAN**

CYCAN was founded with the simple hope of the founding team: “We hope to educate more people about climate change through awareness and advocacy, to give Chinese youth a new vision, to provide different directions, to explore more opportunities in these new areas, and to help youth do what they can”.

As a specialized social organization in the field of climate, CYCAN aims to raise public awareness of climate change through the united action of Chinese youth and extensive international exchange and cooperation, thereby promoting the participation of government departments and the general public in the fight against global climate change. As a youth organization, CYCAN adheres to its mission of “Youth for a Carbon Neutral Future”, promoting practical actions for youth to participate in the process of addressing climate change and cultivating climate leaders with an international perspective. In 2019, CYCAN further launched the concept of “2030 Climate +”, which proposes that by 2030, the organization will be committed to promoting immediate action and effective change for youth and the public to combat climate change.

### **(2) Structure, activities and operating mechanism of CYCAN**

CYCAN, a youth social organization, understands the importance of a well-developed organizational system and stable structure. Internally, it has formed teams and departments with a team of advisors. Externally, CYCAN has utilized its hub role to connect universities and youth groups and build a platform for exchange and cooperation, increasing youth participation in global governance. CYCAN has a long-term strategy based on a Carbon Neutral Future vision, including Carbon Neutral Transition, Climate Education Academy, and Public Advocacy. These focus on carbon-neutral transformation pathways on university campuses, promoting youth and public participation in climate action, and building an effective network of youth and associations to disseminate earth-friendly ideas. In summary, CYCAN has a stable structure and a long-term implementable strategy to ensure its long-term stability.

CYCAN has a wide range of thematic activities in four areas: youth networking, climate advocacy, local practice and international exchange. The branded programs include the International Youth Summit on Energy and Climate Change (IYSECC), CYCAN-COP Chinese Youth Delegation, 2030 Carbon Neutral Campus, Youth Climate Dialogue (YCD), 2030 Climate+, Online Youth Exchange (OYE), etc.

CYCAN's operating mechanism has four key features. First, it focuses on current climate change issues and promotes ideas through advocacy. Second, it builds a youth network and provides a platform for exchange and interaction in global governance. Thirdly, it enriches the types of activities and links with university associations to increase impact. Fourth, it strengthens youth leadership and innovation with a focus on climate action. Through its activities, CYCAN interacts with young people, collects and disseminates timely and accurate information, and maintains a close two-way communication channel with international youth organizations and universities in China. It conducts a wide range of grassroots activities to promote climate governance and encourages young people to take immediate action and make a difference in the fight against climate change. It also shares the stories of outstanding young activists through its official public website "CYCANers Talk".

### **Key features and approaches of CYCAN's participation in global climate governance**

(1) Focus on youth development. CYCAN not only aims to achieve climate change goals such as a "carbon neutral future", but also places a high priority on youth development as part of its engagement in global governance. To achieve this mission and goals, CYCAN is not only a platform to bring together all young people interested in climate change, but also an inspiration and a nurturer. Through enrichment activities, CYCAN provides various platforms and capacity building salons and courses to inspire youth to focus on climate change and sustainable development, such as the International Youth Summit on Energy and Climate Change.

(2) Specific content of participation. Unlike AIESEC, which focuses on a number of SDG areas such as gender, employment and education, CYCAN's engagement in global governance is more specific. The more specific content and objectives of the engagement allow for a concentration of efforts, providing space and resources to increase the depth of activities and projects. However, it also has a narrower audience than the more generalist organizations such as AIESEC, and places greater demands on the professionalism and practical skills of youth organizations.

(3) Rich forms of access. An important way for youth social organizations to participate in global governance is to work with the UN and its related agencies, and to involve youth in the decision-making process of global governance through the institutionalized channels of the UN [According to Yan and Yang, 2017]. For example, CYCAN has led Chinese delegations to the UNFCCC COP and the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to observe climate negotiations and raise the voice of youth. CYCAN also hosted a Youth Climate Dialogue with the UN Institute for Training and Research. In addition to participating in intergovernmental international organizations, youth social organizations can also work with other NGOs. CYCAN and other youth organizations have built platforms for international youth exchanges, such as the International Youth Exchange Programme with the Sierra Club in the USA, which has gradually expanded from the initial exchange between Chinese and American youth to youth exchanges and interactions between more than 20 countries.

(4) Extensive cooperation network. Firstly, CYCAN works closely with the United Nations and its related agencies. For example, its "COP China Youth Delegation" project participated in the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and was officially granted observer status to the UNFCCC in 2019. Secondly, CYCAN has gained some support from the government. The CYCAN Ten-Year Development Report 2007-2017 shows that CYCAN's government partners include provincial and municipal committees of the Communist Youth League, the Department of Climate Change of the Ministry

of Ecology and Environment, and the National Center for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation. Thirdly, CYCAN has close links with foundations, companies and other non-profit organizations. Their financial support for CYCAN is essential for the smooth functioning of the organization, the success of its activities and its participation in global governance. Fourth, it is also worth mentioning that CYCAN works very closely with the university community in China, and many of its projects, such as Global Climate Action, are implemented at universities in China, with more than 500 partners in the university community.

### **Key challenges for CYCAN's participation in global climate governance**

Since its inception, CYCAN has initiated and implemented more than 30 projects, involving over 500 universities, more than 100,000 students directly and indirectly influencing more than a million people. CYCAN has actively led Chinese youth to participate in the global climate governance process, playing an important role as a facilitator both internationally and nationally. However, compared to youth NGOs in developed countries, CYCAN is still in the early stage of development and has the following problems in its operation.

(1) Ambiguous positioning. Over the course of its development, CYCAN has continuously expanded its scope of work, but has not developed a clear and differentiated position. The name "China Youth Climate Action Network (CYCAN)" also suggests that this organization does not have a clear focus, but rather encompasses all aspects of the Chinese youth's response to climate change. This blurring of positioning has meant homogeneity with other organizations and an increasingly broad range of projects with less expertise.

(2) Weak professionalism and low international influence. Professionalism is a crucial factor in the influence of NGO decision-making [Lan et al., 2010]. As mentioned above, too many projects and imprecise positioning are important structural factors in CYCAN's weak professionalism. Furthermore, unlike NGOs, which are mainly composed of experts and academics, CYCAN is composed of university students with a limited understanding of climate change as a professional field and knowledge of international negotiations [Cycan, 2018]. As a result of these factors, CYCAN's professionalism is limited and its voice is less heard at climate conferences.

(3) Limited funding and high financial costs. As a non-profit organization, CYCAN is funded by foundations, partner organizations and corporate sponsors. Although its annual fundraising stabilized at around \$1.7 million around 2015, the amount of funding allocated to each project is relatively limited due to its many internal projects.

(4) Limited project landing. CYCAN's membership is dominated by young people, with a high proportion of university students. In addition to the lack of professional skills mentioned above, the group of university students has to cope with the burden of school courses and the pressure of exams, promotion and employment. This limitation is more evident in projects with longer cycles. Programs that deal with practical issues, such as energy saving on campus, require a team to work over a long period of time. This makes it difficult for student-led teams to secure projects [Li Lulu bambie, 2011].

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this paper identifies four key characteristics of CYCAN's operational mechanism: prioritising current issues, establishing a youth network, diversifying activities, and emphasising climate action. CYCAN's engagement in global climate governance centres around nurturing young people, and is distinguished by its precise focus, diverse range of participatory formats, and extensive collaboration networks. At the same time, CYCAN's involvement in global climate governance has faced four significant challenges: unclear positioning, inadequate expertise, restricted finances, and project implementation constraints. The practice of CYCAN participating in global governance is a microcosm of the internationalization process of many youth social organizations in China. By analyzing the organizational structure, activity content, operation mechanism and existing problems of CYCAN, it can be seen that China youth social organizations have made brilliant achievements in the process of actively entering the world stage and engaging in global

governance, but they are still slightly immature compared with mature youth social organizations in other developed countries.

From the perspective of the government, it is necessary to increase support for youth organizations to participate in global governance. The low political nature of youth social organizations' participation in global governance does not mean that they are out of touch with the government. On the contrary, international youth organizations with great influence in the world, such as the International Youth Foundation and Enactus, all have close interaction with the government. It is through the government's investment and provision of projects that Japan's youth organizations participate in global governance through open bidding, thus better realizing the national interests [According to Dong and Zhang, 2021]. By perfecting laws and regulations, providing policy guidance, shaping social atmosphere and increasing financial support, the government can provide a solid activity foundation for youth organizations to participate in global governance, and at the same time realize effective management of youth organizations. In this context, youth social organizations can also serve national interests.

From the perspective of youth social organizations themselves, it is necessary to continue to improve organizational construction. China's youth social organizations need to refine their positioning, establish contact networks with experts and scholars, and enhance their professionalism and voice in the international community. The survey report shows that young people have realized the seriousness of climate change, but they have not been able to closely integrate climate change as a social background with their own lives and development, or to link climate change as a thinking perspective with broader social issues (such as gender issues), showing a state of high concern and shallow cognition [SEE FOUNDATION, 2022]. In this context, youth social organizations also need to innovate propaganda methods, increase publicity efforts, expand the influence of the organization, actively attract young talents to join, and form a social atmosphere to support their participation in global governance. While keeping consistent with the global mainstream discourse, youth social organizations should also actively integrate national culture and values into the practice of global governance. Rooted in China, youth social organizations also need to constantly expand their global networks in the process of development, and more actively guide young people to participate in global governance affairs.

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**Конфликт интересов: у автора нет конфликта интересов для декларации.  
Conflicts of Interest: the author has no conflicts of interest to declare.**

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